Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain

By Lynn Abrams

The icon

During the reign of Queen Victoria, a woman's place was in the home, as domesticity and motherhood were considered by society at large to be a sufficient emotional fulfilment for females. These constructs kept women far away from the public sphere in most ways, but during the 19th century charitable missions did begin to extend the female role of service, and Victorian feminism emerged as a potent political force.

The transformation of Britain into an industrial nation had profound consequences for the ways in which women were to be idealised in Victorian times. New kinds of work and new kinds of urban living prompted a change in the ways in which appropriate male and female roles were perceived. In particular, the notion of separate spheres - woman in the private sphere of the home and hearth, man in the public sphere of business, politics and sociability - came to influence the choices and experiences of all women, at home, at work, in the streets.

' ... Victoria became an icon of late-19th-century middle-class femininity and domesticity. '

The Victorian era, 1837-1901, is characterised as the domestic age *par excellence*, epitomised by Queen Victoria, who came to represent a kind of femininity which was centred on the family, motherhood and respectability. Accompanied by her beloved husband Albert, and surrounded by her many children in the sumptuous but homely surroundings of Balmoral Castle, Victoria became an icon of late-19th-century middle-class femininity and domesticity.

Indeed, Victoria came to be seen as the very model of marital stability and domestic virtue. Her marriage to Albert represented the ideal of marital harmony. She was described as 'the mother of the nation', and she came to embody the idea of home as a cosy, domestic space. When Albert died in 1861 she retreated to her home and family in preference to public political engagements.

Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain

By Lynn Abrams

The ideal woman

Victorian husband and wife

Apart from the queen - who was the ideal Victorian woman? She may have resembled Mrs Frances Goodby, the wife of the Reverend J Goodby of Ashby-de-la-Zouch in Leicestershire, of whom it was said at her death that she carried out her duties as mistress of a small family with 'piety, patience, frugality and industry'. Moreover, '... her ardent and unceasing flow of spirits, extreme activity and diligence, her punctuality, uprightness and remarkable frugality, combined with a firm reliance on God ... carried her through the severest times of pressure, both with credit and respectability ...' (*The General Baptist Repository and Missionary Observer*, 1840).

Mrs Goodby exemplified the good and virtuous woman whose life revolved around the domestic sphere of the home and family. She was pious, respectable and busy - no life of leisure for her. Her diligence and evident constant devotion to her husband, as well as to her God, identifies Frances Goodby as an example to other women. She accepted her place in the sexual hierarchy. Her role was that of helpmeet and domestic manager.

'... domesticity was trumpeted as a female domain.'

By the time that the industrial era was well advanced in Britain, the ideology that assigned the private sphere to the woman and the public sphere of business, commerce and politics to the man had been widely dispersed. In popular advice literature and domestic novels, as well as in the advertisement columns of magazines and newspapers, domesticity was trumpeted as a female domain.

The increasing physical separation of the home and the workplace, for many amongst the professional and commercial classes, meant that these women lost touch with production, and came to fashion an identity solely within the domestic sphere. It was through their duties within the home that women were offered a moral duty, towards their families, especially their husbands, and towards society as a whole.

However, as the example of Frances Goodby shows, the ideal woman at this time was not the weak, passive creature of romantic fiction. Rather she was a busy, able and upright figure who drew strength from her moral superiority and whose virtue was manifested in the service of others.

Thus the notion of separate spheres - as lived in the industrial period - was not a blind adherence to a set of imposed values. Rather it was a way of living and working based on evangelical beliefs about the importance of the family, the constancy of marriage and woman's innate moral goodness.

Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain

By Lynn Abrams

At home

'Punch' cartoon, 1858: 'A very pretty church, but the door is certainly very narrow!'

The home was regarded as a haven from the busy and chaotic public world of politics and business, and from the grubby world of the factory. Those who could afford to, created cosy domestic interiors with plush fabrics, heavy curtains and fussy furnishings which effectively cocooned the inhabitants from the world outside. The middle-class household contained concrete expressions of domesticity in the form of servants, homely décor, comfortable furnishings, home entertainment, and clothing.

'The female body was dressed to emphasise a woman's separation from the world of work.'

Women's clothes began to mirror women's function. In the 19th century women's fashions became more sexual - the hips, buttocks and breasts were exaggerated with crinolines, hoopskirts and corsets which nipped in the waist and thrust out the breasts. The female body was dressed to emphasise a woman's separation from the world of work. By wearing dresses that resembled their interior furnishings, women became walking symbols of their social function - wife, mother, domestic manager.

The fashion for constricting corsets and large skirts served to underline not only a woman's prime function, but also the physical constraints on her activities. It was difficult to move freely wearing corsets that made it hard to breathe, and heavy fabrics that impeded movement. No wonder that those women who could afford to keep up with the latest fashions were prone to fainting, headaches and what was termed 'hysteria'.

Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain

By Lynn Abrams

Household management


Victorian woman darning in her home

Domesticity also entailed pressures to conform to other new standards. Numerous publications told women how to be good wives and household managers.

Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management* was first published in 1861, and remained a bestseller for over 50 years. It contained advice on how to become the perfect housewife, and how to create a domestic interior that provided a welcoming haven for the man of the house. In 1890 *The Christian Miscellany and Family Visitor* (a religious magazine) wrote in its 'Hints for Home Life' column:

'She [the housewife] is the architect of home, and it depends on her skill, her foresight, her soft arranging touches whether it shall be the "lodestar to all hearts", or whether it shall be a house from which husband and children are glad to escape either to the street, the theatre, or the tavern.'

'Most middle-class households had just one servant... '

But of course maintaining a middle-class household in the 19th century involved hard physical labour, most of it carried out by women. All the major tasks involved fetching and boiling water. Washing and ironing clothes was strenuous work. Floors were washed and scrubbed with sand. Food was prepared at home.

In addition, few families had flushing toilets before the end of the century and, although ready-made clothing became available in the middle of the century, underclothes were still made by hand and bed-linen was hemmed and repaired at home. So, if it could be afforded, servants were hired to carry out these domestic tasks.

It is a fallacy that most middle-class women were able to afford sufficient servants to allow them to spend their lives in idle leisure. Most middle-class households had just one servant - sufficient to give the woman of the house a certain status, but insufficient to allow her to spend days doing embroidery and playing the piano.

Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain

By Lynn Abrams

The ideology


Victorian women indoors

If we approach 19th-century middle-class domestic life from the perspective of those living it, it becomes clear that women actively moulded a culture that served their own interests. The domestic sphere was a cultural expression of the female world. Their fashions, etiquette, domestic furnishings, social engagements, religious devotion and charitable activity all served to delineate a universe within which women could demonstrate their power.

It is only in prescriptive literature that the bourgeois woman, who idly spent her days exercising her creative talents, socialising with other women and supervising the servants, can be found. In reality most middle-class women were active both within and outside the home.

'This created a supply of cheap labour in the form of married women ...'

So far the ideal Victorian women has been portrayed as a member of the middle classes, but the ideology of domesticity was also powerful amongst the working classes. Working-class men began to demand the privileges of domesticity for their wives, while protecting their own jobs and rates of pay.

At the same time working-class women were beginning to demand these privileges for themselves, in order to protect their status within the home. In practice, though, domesticity meant something rather different for these women. Homework, that is paid work undertaken in the home, was regarded as compatible with marriage and children, so working-class women found themselves working at badly paid jobs in their own homes, while still maintaining the fiction that women's only duties lay within the domestic sphere.

Thus domestic industry was able to expand during the 19th century, given a boost by the ideology of domesticity. This created a supply of cheap labour in the form of married women, who earned the additional income that enabled the family to survive.

Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain

By Lynn Abrams

Wife and mother


Victorian nursery maid with children

At the heart of the domestic ideal was the mother and her children. Since early in the 19th century the role of mother had been idealised. Motherhood was no longer simply a reproductive function, but was imbued with symbolic meaning. Domesticity and motherhood were portrayed as sufficient emotional fulfilment for women and many middle-class women regarded motherhood and domestic life as a 'sweet vocation', a substitute for women's productive role.

'... the childless single woman was a figure to be pitied.'

Women of the middle classes spent more time with their children than their predecessors. They were more likely to breast-feed, to play with and educate their children, and to incorporate them in the day-to-day life of the home. Middle-class women who, by mid century, were giving birth 'confined' within the home, now achieved true womanhood if they responded emotionally to their infants and bonded with them through breast-feeding and constant attendance. Motherhood was seen as an affirmation of their identity.

Marriage signified a woman's maturity and respectability, but motherhood was confirmation that she had entered the world of womanly virtue and female fulfilment. For a woman not to become a mother meant she was liable to be labelled inadequate, a failure or in some way abnormal. Motherhood was expected of a married woman and the childless single woman was a figure to be pitied. She was often encouraged to find work caring for children - as a governess or a nursery maid - presumably to compensate her for her loss.

Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain

By Lynn Abrams

Social responsibility


A Victorian mother, pushing a pram

The message that motherhood was woman's highest achievement, albeit within marriage, never weakened through the course of the century. Indeed, it was in this period that motherhood was idealised as the zenith of a woman's emotional and spiritual fulfilment. At the same time, however, motherhood was becoming a social responsibility, a duty to the state and thus a full-time job, which could not easily be combined with paid work. And mothering became something that was no longer natural but which had to be learned.

In the new industrial cities such as Manchester, Bradford and Glasgow, infant mortality rates were high. Responsibility for the appalling death rate amongst infants was roundly placed on the shoulders of mothers. Middle-class philanthropists, government inspectors and medical men united in their condemnation of the infant-care methods of poor women. Infant deaths, it was believed, could be prevented if poor mothers breast-fed their babies and were taught baby care.

'... the ideal of true motherhood demanded women be constantly present for their children ...'

In reality, the high infant mortality rate in the industrial cities was just as much to do with poor sanitation, dirty water, overcrowding and the pervasiveness of disease, but these were more difficult problems to solve. Yet the ideal of true motherhood demanded women be constantly present for their children - it implied a commitment to domesticity and was therefore seen as incompatible with the demands of the labour market. Working-class mothers were therefore more likely to be labelled irresponsible and neglectful, when in truth they were struggling to combine the demands of childcare and putting a meal on the table.

Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain

By Lynn Abrams

Woman's mission

'Punch' cartoon, 1894: Victorian women took their own brand of morality into the homes of the poor

Middle-class women of the Victorian era did leave their homes - and not just to socialise but to visit the homes of the poor. These women used their position of privilege to export expertise in domestic affairs to those regarded as in need of advice, so they might attain the same high standards of household management. The power that middle-class women had achieved in the home was now used by them in order to gain access to another world characterised by, as they saw it, poverty, drink, vice and ignorance.

'They could lecture working-class women on cleanliness ... '

At the same time, entering this world provided the lady philanthropist with a little excitement, maybe even danger, and a means to self-discovery. Moreover, these women's unshakeable belief in their own domestic morality not only informed the form of charity they chose to sponsor - mother and baby homes, kindergartens, temperance campaigns and health and hygiene reform - but also those persons deemed worthy of help and the conditions demanded for the receipt of charity.

So they provided aid to mothers and infants in the name of improving infant and maternal mortality rates, while barring illegitimate children from their crèches. They could lecture working-class women on cleanliness in homes resembling slums, while they relied on servants to keep their own homes up to the required standard.

Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britian

The icon

The ideal woman

At home

Household management

The ideology

Social Responsibility

Wife and Mother

Woman's mission