

‘Man to command and woman to obey’, according to the father in Tennyson’s *The Princess* (1847). Drawing on your reading of *Middlemarch* and your study of the history and art of the nineteenth century, discuss whether this presents an adequate picture of gender role within Victorian society (with consideration to work, religion, domestic life and class).

The gender issue in Victorian society initially appears to be based upon Romantic ideals. Myths abound throughout historical society such as suggesting that for a woman to get married and raise a family is the way for her to lead a fulfilled life, and that her place is in the home. Such myths are the basis of popular fairy tales (the brothers Grimm compiled their *Fairy Tales* between 1812-4) where a beautiful princess would be rescued by the heroic prince. The same myths meant that women found unsuitable marriage partners for the sake of becoming socially respectable, and in doing so sacrificed their own identity in becoming the object of man’s desire. The idea of seeing women as an evil influence also has mythological roots in the biblical story of Adam and Eve.

Through an exploration of the role of women in the workplace, their position relative to society can most clearly be discerned. Despite the subjection implicit within the idea, the situation to which families aspired was to prevent the mother having to work outside the home. However, in reality this could not, and did not happen. The first problem is that contemporary data reveals that there were more women than men in England, which means that there would inevitably be a portion of women for whom marriage was impossible. Secondly, the “wages of many semi-skilled and unskilled male workers were so low or so uncertain that they would not support a family unless supplemented by the earnings of wives and children” (Burnett, 1974). Indeed analysis of the census data reveals that around 1851 between 26% and 30% of the female population was employed (Best, 1985, p119 and Burnett, 1974). The census also reveals that domestic employment was the most common occupation (primarily of the unmarried or widowed), with textile work a close second; in the late 1830s “women ... comprised almost 70 per cent of the factory workforce (Evans, 1983, p152). As Burnett (1974) points out, the census probably did not include a large number of women working from home who would have been afraid to declare their full income for fear of additional taxation. Women (and children) also provided a reserve pool of labour that

could be called upon as necessary. This was particularly found in agrarian communities where, for example, extra help would be needed around harvest time. In these situations women would be given the jobs which were physically less demanding, and as such their wages would be a small proportion of their male counterparts.

The low wages for manual female workers forced women into prostitution, as Best reminds us ‘the oldest profession in the world’, to supplement their meagre incomes. In doing this, the concept of the fallen woman, so prevalent in the artistic world, was embodied. The many portrayals of the fallen woman from all social strata, such as Redgrave’s *The Outcast* (1851), serve as a salutary reminder that once branded as such, a woman would find it nearly impossible to return to her former position within society. This is greatly at odds with men who could commit their indiscretions freely, and still insist on a chaste bride.

Compared to the hellish conditions and pitiful wages that working class women had to tolerate, the aspiring middle classes depicted in Eliot’s *Middlemarch* live in a different world. Rosamund, and later Celia, delight in fulfilling their domestic and maternal roles, and Dorothea’s attempts to prove herself to the rest of the world, be it through her plans for workers’ cottages, or her attempts at helping Casaubon are all rejected by the male characters, and every attempt is made to make her accept her wifely lot. Indeed her sister, Celia, mocks Dorothea’s aspirations to do anything in life apart from acting as the ‘angel of the hearth’.

The crushing of Dorothea’s dreams of leading a fulfilled life after her wedding also serves to illustrate the subjection of women by religion, specifically Christianity, through her marriage to Casaubon. The marriage ceremony in use at the time (dating from 1662) commits the woman to a life long contract of obedience by law: “Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honour [him] ... so long as ye both shall live?”. In comparison, the man is merely obliged to “love her, comfort her, [and] honour [her]” (BCP, p292). References in the ceremony’s rubric to the “Laws of the Realm” (*ibid.*, p292) serve to remind the couple that the power given by the ceremony to the man applies not only in the church, but in society as a

whole. The power concern is even more alarming when the number of marriages which were arranged, rather than as a result of romantic love, is considered. Women were treated as a commodity which would be exchanged to benefit someone else's "wealth, social position, or other advantage" (Wood, 1990, p79).

Despite the social improvements for women during the nineteenth century, the fact that women were not allowed to get ordained comes as no surprise considering the country's power holders and decision makers. Allowing them to become religious leaders would give them a position of power which could lead to challenges to the existing patriarchal society. What does come as a surprise is that the Church of England did not see fit to lift this restriction until the end of the twentieth century, and even today women are still not allowed to become bishops within the Church of England.

As has been seen, the idyllic domestic situation was far from reality for the majority of women, but this did not stop the celebrated ideal being widely represented in art. Pictures portraying mothers as Madonna-like figures with their babies are legion, and contented children playing are also common subjects. Pictures of the woman in her wifely role are also prevalent, and Howkett's *Preparing Tea* with its similarities to Clarke's *The Labourer's Welcome* depicting the wife at home waiting for her husband's return from a day's work show how the narrow thinking is applied across different social classes. *Preparing Tea* also includes the two daughters toasting bread, and fetching their father's slippers: all of this preparation for father's return clearly marks him as the undisputed head of the household whose requests and demands would be heeded by all of this family. This again illustrates the subservient role of women in the private as well as the public sphere.

The Trade Unions were also responsible for keeping women at home as they sought to create workplaces where the "wives should be in their proper sphere at home ... instead of being dragged into competition for livelihood against the great and strong men of the world" (Abrahams, 2001). The concept of the male as the breadwinner, whose role it was to provide for and protect his wife from having to work, can again be seen to have been propagated by those men who hold a position of power.

The woman's place in society was clearly defined by contemporary culture and society, but as early as 1869 the "nature of women" was questioned by John Stuart Mill who described it as "an eminently artificial thing – the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in other" (Mill, 1869, chapter 1). This acknowledges that the role played by women is unfair, and that everything that is expected of them is based on an unjust social construction. Despite being riddled with inequality, the social situation was seen to be so for the best. Indeed, taking the quotation from *The Princess* in context is interesting:

"Man to command and woman to obey;
All else is confusion" (Tennyson, 1847, Canto V)

This indicates how people feared change to the existing societal system, as it would take their ordered existence and throw it into disarray. However, the roles of men and women had been created by men alone, and duly disseminated by them. It should therefore come as no surprise that such lines were written by a male writer.

Another contemporary poet, Longfellow, suggests a deeper understanding of the workings of the social structure in *Hiawatha*:

"As unto the bow the cord is,
So unto the man is woman;
Through she bends him she obeys him,
Though she draws him, yet she follows,
Useless each without the other!" (Longfellow, 1855, Song X)

While it may appear that he is simply following the conventions of female dependence, the interconnection of men and women is a key theme. The potential of the female is seen, she can "bend" and "draw" man, but conforming to the patriarchal ideal she still chooses to "obey" him. However, the final line of the quotation suggests that it is not such a single sided situation, as man would be nothing in either the public or private sphere without woman.

The gender roles within Victorian society are summarised quite succinctly by Tennyson's description, and they are reinforced throughout society, and through other contemporary artistic media. The desire of

men to protect their self-awarded positions within society is clear, but looking at other historical sources and artistic representations, the forthcoming changes are certainly not unanticipated. As with any instance of repression, revolution is a likely consequence, and social developments from the end of the Victorian era to the present day all serve to address the inherent inequalities to women that have survived for centuries.

(1551 words)

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