

The Woman Question in Victorian England

The 19th century saw significant developments in and the widespread questioning of the place of women in English society. While many women would increasingly demand more political and legal rights and greater economic and social opportunities, the period also saw the increasing identification of women with the domestic sphere. Coventry Patmore's poem "The Angel in the House" (1854), for example, helped to consolidate this ideal of the *domestic angel*, the idea of the perfect woman as submissive to her husband, meek, powerless, and deeply spiritual. The woman question in Victorian England referred to the various debates about women's place in society, with opposing voices emphasizing either the need for women to have greater economic, educational, and political opportunities or the idea that women properly belonged in the home as caretaker to her family. Queen Victoria herself reflected these two sides of the question, as she was often depicted as and presented herself in terms of the ideal wife and mother even as she reigned as the monarch.

The reasons why the place of women came to become so central to political, social, and literary commentary are manifold, but many can be traced to the radical changes in English society brought about by industrialization and the development of capitalism. For many English women, industrialization brought new types of grinding work and urban poverty. Many forms of industrial labor could as readily be done by women as by men, and women often could be employed for less money. The widespread development of women's labor in industrialization challenged traditional notions of the woman as largely bound to the home or the farm and economically inferior. At the same time, for many middle- and upper-class women, the expansion of wealth and leisure corresponded with the opening of some educational opportunities, even as women continued to be barred from higher education. Further, due to social and legal prohibitions, established traditions, and contemporary scientific theories about women's physical and mental limitations, even the most educated women had great difficulty practicing a profession (the law, medicine, etc.). The second half of the century began to see some changes – the first women's college opened in 1848, a woman was first accredited as a physician in 1859 – but these changes were consistently fought along the way.

As we see in some of the readings in this subunit, these challenges to traditional gender roles found political expression in the movement to expand voting rights to women and to change laws governing married women's rights to own property. As more men were enfranchised through the Reform Bills of 1832 and 1867, suffragists began to call for women to have the right to vote, a fight they finally won in 1918. In our readings for this subunit, Helen Taylor's pamphlet, originally published anonymously in 1867, sets out the case for women's voting rights in response to an amendment put forward by her stepfather, the famous philosopher and defender of women's rights, John Stuart Mill. That amendment, which failed, would have included women in the expansion of voting rights in the Reform Bill of 1867. At the beginning of the 19th century, married women legally had no standing due to the notion of *coverture*, the legal idea that a woman's

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rights were subsumed under her husband's and thus women had no right to own property. Barbara Bodichon's *Brief Summary* – excerpted in this subunit – distills the many laws that treated women unequally. In particular, her work helped to set the stage for the passage of the Married Women's Property Act in 1882, an act that finally allowed married women to own and control their own property.

As Professor Evans's lecture emphasizes, the Victorian era also saw changes to ideas concerning sexuality. While we often think of the Victorians as prudish, this period saw widespread prostitution, the development of pornography, and the emergence of the medical and scientific study of sex. While women were idealized as nearly disembodied angels – despite the sexual nature of being mothers and wives – and long-standing associations of womanly virtue with chastity and virginity continued, other women were, in various ways, increasingly seen as nothing but sexual objects. By most accounts, prostitution, for example, became increasingly widespread. With increasing constraints on what was considered legitimate in terms of sexual morality, men seemed to be driven to more illicit sexual practices, while the economic transformations forced more women to turn to selling their bodies to support themselves. This split, sometimes spoken of as the virgin/whore dichotomy, reinforced the idea that female sexuality was immoral. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (see subunit 4.2.2), for example, ambivalently confronts this characterization of women's sexual morality, at once suggesting Bertha's degenerate condition is the result of her sexual being while also questioning Victorian society's dichotomous thinking through Jane's more complex character.

Women's place in the public realm was often conflated with concerns about her sexuality, and as women began to take on more economic responsibilities, to devote themselves to more public amusements, and to take more responsibility for their lives, the backlash often expressed itself in concerns about sex. We can see this in Eliza Lynn Linton's nostalgia for the "The Angel in the House" in her attack on *The Girl of the Period*. Writing at the end of the century, Linton attacks the new woman, the type of woman who increasingly takes more prominent economic and social roles, by contrasting her with the English girl of the past who "could be trusted alone . . . because of the innate purity and dignity of her nature." While much of Linton's focus is on the new girl's devotion to fashion, she hints repeatedly that her "love of pleasure" has led to an unnatural indulgence of her sexuality.

Throughout this unit, we will see many other authors reflect on and represent these debates over the place of women in Victorian society, the role of a woman as a wife and a mother, her place within the economy and the political system, and the nature of her as a sexual being.

Summary

- The Victorian Era saw significant challenges to traditional ideas about women's submissive place within society.
- Some of these challenges derived from the transformations brought about

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by industrialization, as more lower-class women became wage laborers and more middle- and upper-class women gained greater access to education and began to attain more economic, political, and social opportunities.

- At the same time, people of the Victorian Era saw idealized the “Angel in the House,” the view that the perfect woman was embodied in the submissive, selfless devotion of the domestic housewife.
- In contrast to this disembodied ideal that rendered women nearly sexless, Victorian society also, at times, objectified women as nothing but sex objects, reinvigorating the classic virgin/whore dichotomy.
- The backlash against women’s social and political development often expressed itself in terms of concerns about women’s sexuality.

References

Linton, Eliza Lynn. 1883. *The Girl of the Period: And Other Social Essays*.