
The Victorian Women: Their Struggles and Role in Society

In the Victorian era, women were expected to live by certain rules and virtues and had a pretty rigid role in society. They were to bear children, do housework and to be selfless, submissive and pure. They were considered to be the weaker sex and was thereby not allowed to work (with some exceptions) or to get a higher education. (Victorian-era. org) This was more or less the conventional view of women, which many women began to question in one way or another. This could be seen in numerous examples of Victorian literature, some of which I will be discussing (victorianweb. org). The subject of this essay will be three different texts: "The Great Social Evil" by ANONYMOUS, excerpts from Sarah Stickney Ellis' "The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits" and the Autobiography of Harriet Martineau. I will discuss whether or not these examples of Victorian literature questions or sanctions this degradation of women in Victorian society.

As an era of sexual repression, prostitution grew rapidly. The church deemed sex to be for procreational uses only, it was not to be anything pleasurable. Women were not to be passionate or to have any sexual desires because it was deemed sinful and a sickness. They were to be "The Angel in the House" – the perfect housewife; powerless, completely devoted to her husband and children, and most importantly, to be "pure", that being someone with no lust, someone who would not partake in sexual conduct outside of marriage, for women could not have sex with anyone but their husband (Victorian-era. org, Victorianweb. org). Hence the social persecution of prostitutes, based on the belief that they were impure. This is strongly opposed by the anonymous woman in "The Great Social Evil", who argues that women are not as "pure" as society wants them to be. That they are in fact also curious and sexual beings (using herself as an example) and that there's nothing inherently wrong with that (Anonymous 1621).

As someone who was never taught moral principles, she is puzzled by the conventional view of women such as herself, and the ones of better class (Anonymous 1622). She does more than question it, she doesn't understand it, nor does she understand the notion that one is superior to the other; "[. . .] if all the circumstances and conditions of our lives had been reversed, would Madam, my Lady, have done better or been better than I?" (Anonymous 1622). A rhetorical question intended to convey that if you strip away all which causes the social distinction between them, they are equal human beings who have just been conditioned in different circumstances. That having been said, she doesn't think that there is enough foundation to build the prejudice and condescension people tend to hold towards women such as herself. Knowing of her upbringing; how she would lark with boys of her own age and be inspired by that independent tradeswoman she would frequently encounter (Anonymous 1621), and the general lack of good examples around her, one could say that to her there never was a conventional

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way for a woman to be. Ellis's "The Women of England" is not as straightforward.

Although she exceedingly supports the conventional view of women, she is still somewhat progressive in her beliefs. She thinks that women's influence in the world is equally as important to the men's in the way that the women influence them. The woman morally steers the man, keeping him from temptation (Ellis 1611,1612), and as she says; [. . .] but as far as the noble daring of Britain has sent forth her adventurous sons, and that is to every point of danger on the habitable globe, they have borne along with them a generosity, a disinterestedness, and a moral courage, derived in no small measure from the female influence of their native country (emphasis added) (Ellis 1612). In other words; the woman gives the man the tools to do good, which she thinks is deeply underestimated. She thinks that the given influence could be extended to further fight the "evils of society" by actively enforcing/enhancing "disinterested kindness" in them (Ellis 1612), which brings me to my next point: her advocacy for female education. As mentioned before, education was not thought fit for women and it was not until the later years of the 19th century that women were granted the opportunity (wjeis. org). Therefore, on one side she could be considered to somewhat question the conventional view of women, but as her general idea of it is not for women to be academically educated as equal to men, but to be taught "disinterested kindness", the key component that makes her able to be a good wife and mother (Ellis 1612), she commends it in a greater extent. With that being said, she doesn't question the conventional woman, rather she questions the collective underestimation of women's influence in society. Martineau's Autobiography is different in the way that we don't get a strong indication of her opinion until the very end, though a subtle one compared to the previous texts which had a purpose and a clear and direct voiced opinion.

Still, it is apparent that she does not agree with the expectations put on her by society and her religious establishment, by the decisions that she makes and her desire for more fulfillment. You first get the idea when she describes how she would deliberately go against the norms by translating books in secret after first mentioning how unthinkable it was for women to "study very conspicuously; and especially with pen in hand" (Martineau 1616). It is also clear in the way she reacts when the brother approves of her paper and nearly demands her to leave it to other women to do what is expected of them to do and pursue authorship (Martineau 1619); "I went home in a sort of dream, so that the squares of the pavement seemed to float before my eyes" (Martineau 1619). These feelings or sensations that she felt clearly indicates that she was pleased by this, which means that she had no desire to read aloud and make stockings and other patronizing pursuits deemed fit for women for the rest of her life. This is further proved by the fact that she considers losing nearly all that she had in the world and being left at destitute as a blessing, for the reason that it meant that she didn't have to conform to her role anymore (Martineau 1619). "Many and many a time since have we said that, but for that loss of money, we might have lived on in the ordinary provincial method of ladies with small means, sewing,

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and economizing and growing narrower every year” (emphasis added) (Martineau 1619). This is when we get a more appreciable indication of her disagreement, she evidently did not think the means of women amounted to much and was not satisfied with it. Being a woman in the Victorian era was hard no doubt, with the daily injustice and misogyny they had to endure and having to deal with a demoralizing society with a rigid religious system.

Though of course, not everyone perceived it as such (referring to Ellis), *The Great Social evil* and Martineau’s *Autobiography* are great examples of the questioning of the ideal woman in society and it shows that even with all that repression at the time, there were still women with vision and the consciousness to question and think ahead of their time. These women, Ellis included, found their voice in a time of silence and with their courage they opened up the horizons for conditions to improve, like a catalyst of future enlightenment and improvement.

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