



Gallery Walk Images and Texts, Continued

**Victorian Women: Not What You Might Think**, by Gina Zorzi Cline

Try to picture a Victorian woman and chances are your mental picture looks something like this: a woman in a tight corset and long dress, sitting in a floral parlor, drinking tea as she entertains other women like herself. Perhaps a child in a long white dress plays with a hoop in the hall. Your picture might vary slightly, but chances are it has the following in common: the woman is rich enough to have a parlor (and to sit in it drinking tea instead of working), the woman is white, and the world she inhabits is a world of women and children, with no men in sight.

There is a reason this image is in our heads: the Victorian concept of “ideal womanhood” was broadcast far and wide, through advertisements, advice columns, novels, art, and politics and has had long-lasting effects on both American and British culture up to the present day. At the heart of this ideal was the belief that women and men lived in two different spheres: men in the rough and tumble public world of business, politics, and intellectual ideas; women in the pure and protected private world of the home and family. This separation might seem old fashioned today, but there is an even more basic problem with it: even in the Victorian era, it wasn’t true.

Or, at least, it wasn’t true for at least 75% percent of British people. Why? It all comes down to one word: class.

Victorian British society was very strictly segregated by social class. Your class determined what you did, what you wore, who you married, even how you spoke. Generally, people were born, lived, and died in the same class.

**Working Classes:** Physical Labor – 75% of the British population

**Unskilled Labor (85% of the working class)**

Most Victorians, men and women both, worked at manual labor jobs on farms, in factories, or as servants. As Sally Mitchell writes in *Daily Life in Victorian England*, “poor and working class women did many jobs that were hard, dirty, and dangerous (p. 45).” Everyone worked long hours, usually 12 to 14 hours a day, 6 days a week. When working class families had small children, the wife would temporarily stop working outside the home. With only the father’s income, the family would be quite poor, so women looked for other ways to continue to make money. Working class women took in boarders, sewing, washing, anything to help make ends meet. By the age of 10 or so, most working class children were working full time in order to help their families keep food on the table.



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### **Skilled Labor (15% of the working class)**

Skilled jobs were jobs that required a specific kind of training – an apprenticeship. Printers, carpenters, dressmakers, bakers, nurses, and teachers were all careers that skilled trade if the family could afford to lose out on the child’s income while she or she was in training. Girls in these families were often trained as nurses, teachers, or dressmakers and expected to contribute to the family income when they married.

### **Middle Class: Mental Labor – between 15 and 25% of the British Population**

Some members of this class were small shopkeepers who barely made ends meet while others were incredibly wealthy businessmen. The most important thing to understand is that the middle class was not defined by money but by a common set of ideals: standards for manners, language, clothing, home life, etc. Middle class values included hard work, education (for both boys and girls), family togetherness, and ambition. At the beginning of the Victorian era, many middle class women worked. Doctors’ wives acted as nurses or assistants, farmers’ wives supervised the dairy, shopkeepers’ wives might run the front of the shop or handle the bookkeeping. By the end of the era, work and home were geographically separate and these wives became exclusively housekeepers. The modern image of an “ideal” family: a working father, a stay at home mother, and children whose lives centered around family activities comes from the Victorian middle class. In this image, the home is a safe, pure, moral place to which men could retreat and in which women and children are “protected” from the corrupting influences of the outside world.

### **Upper Class: The Aristocracy and Landed Gentry – less than 1% of the British Population**

The upper class inherited their money, living off of the rents and profits from lands they owned. These lands were passed down, intact, to the oldest son in each generation. The oldest son was expected to take his father’s place, helping the king or queen to run the country. Younger sons usually were educated for a profession such as a minister or a military officer. Women spent their time visiting, shopping, and entertaining. Women were expected to be wives, mothers, and hostesses, not leaders. With a few exceptions, to be part of the upper class, one had to be born into it. Later in the Victorian era, some very rich middle class businessmen were able to marry their children into the aristocracy.



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While class structures in Victorian England were very rigid, this was also a time of great social change. The Industrial Revolution changed the way people lived and the way they thought. Slavery was outlawed. Women advocated for their rights. More and more people worked in factories instead of in their own homes. Big change makes people nervous. It makes sense that, the more things changed, the more people clung to the image of the “ideal” home and family, no matter how different the image was from most women’s reality. The pure Victorian woman, tucked away in her cocoon of domestic bliss, offered a port in the whirling storm of a changing world.

### Sources

Daily Life in Victorian England by Sally Mitchell, Greenwood Press, London, 2009

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian\\_britain/women\\_home/ideals\\_womanhood\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain/women_home/ideals_womanhood_01.shtml)

Inside the Victorian Home: A Portrait of Domestic Life in Victorian England by Judith Flanders, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2003