

Victoria's Real Secret

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History proves one thing; men will strive against all odds their entire lives to assert their superiority above other men. Whether it involves fighting in an arena or amassing so much wealth you can pay other men to bow to you and your wishes, men have died every day in all of the history of the Earth in pursuit of this one dream. The question then becomes, what did that struggle look like in Victorian England? Or perhaps more importantly, how could a man win?

Masculinity in Victorian England was one of the most complex concepts of the era and shaped every aspect of the period, from education and laws, to physical spaces. Because of the influence the concept of masculinity had on the lives of women, it was essential for Victorian men and women to have a deep understanding of the qualities that defined the perfect Victorian male. As is often the case, the knowledge of what constituted a good man was learned through experiences and cultural expectations, and was not generally stated explicitly. This paper will first describe what qualities have been discerned to be masculine during the Victorian era. After those have been established the paper will discuss what Victorians viewed as challenges to traditional masculinity, and then what were considered reinforces of the culture of ideal Victorian masculinity. Finally this paper will analyze how the expectations placed on Victorian men, changed the roles of women and became the defining factor in every aspect of Victorian life.

Masculinity is defined in *Oxford Dictionaries* as primarily physical. Someone who has “strength, muscularity, ruggedness and toughness.”¹ This modern definition only represents a fraction of what the Victorian definition of the word would have been. Because there is no explicitly stated list of qualities that make up the ideal Victorian man, deductions have to be made from resources of the time, such as literature. These resources give us several qualities that are generally unanimously accepted by Victorians as many qualities. These qualities have deep and somewhat changeable meanings during the era and it is because of that, that the concept of masculinity is so hard to define. The ideal Victorian man was several things, brave, intelligent, physically strong, emotionally independent, financially responsible, moral, independent, somewhat rugged and untamed. Finally all of these qualities had to come together for the protection of women in order for a man to be truly fulfilled and have worth in Victorian society. Although the listed qualities are the simple definition of what needed to exist in a man’s character for him to be respected as a man in Victorian England, the complexity of the issue lays in the exceptions to the rule. Seldom is a man found who is perfect in any era, including that of the Victorians. Because of this, although the concept of what created the ideal man was never in question, the amount of each quality a man had, or societal atonement of a lack of one quality if he displayed an excess of a different value meant that the definition of masculinity was constantly in flux. This inconsistency manifests itself in many ways throughout the Victorian period and rhetoric centered around what the minimum

¹ "Masculinity.": *Definition of in Oxford Dictionaries (Thesaurus of English)*. Web. 03 Nov. 2014.

requirements to be masculine, and therefore a good man, can be seen in every aspect of the Victorian period. It can specifically be seen when analyzing what Victorians viewed as challengers to traditional masculinity.

The primary opposition to the ideal Victorian concept of masculinity was peace. Traditionally the English definition of masculinity was centered around bravery on the battlefield. The romanticism with which Victorians read stories about Arthur and Lancelot showed that they still dreamed of a man who could prove his merit through heroic acts on the battlefield, and honor in their personal conduct towards other men.² Traditionally in almost any historical culture, a man's ability to fight was what defined him as a real man, and as we read earlier, that physicality is what continues to be used to define what is truly masculine in nature. Because the Victorian era brought about an unprecedented period of peace, they had to search for new, and often less obvious ways to prove they had the characteristics that made them men. Stienbech argues that this period of peace meant that men replaced the traditional expression of their bravery on the battlefield with a much more domestic version, where the focus lied in their ability to protect their wives from things such as working and the cruel work-focused world.³ While it is true that the movement away from a warrior-type masculinity changed the meaning of the concept in Victorian England, the belief of the English that an ideal man would still display some of those raw qualities, such as strength and physical presence

² Girouard, Mark. *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981. 180.

³ Steinbach, Susie L. *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Oxon: Routledge, 2012. 133.

did not change. Bravery, and especially ability to protect were central to the Victorians even while the peacetime forced them to change their expectations of men.

During the Victorian era men were no longer encouraged to both prove their bravery on the battlefield, which had also traditionally been a way in which they reaffirmed their loyalty to Christianity. It was because of this that the second challenger that Victorians pointed to, as a threat to ideal masculinity, was the Church. Ironically the role of men as protectors of the faith had shifted almost completely to women after the Crusades. In the approximately four hundred year span between the end of the crusades and the beginning of the Victorian era, several factors had led to the reversal of roles of men and women in protecting the faith. Most importantly the move from Catholicism by Henry VIII, was a major breaking point in the physical religion that had dominated England until that time. After Henry VIII the church in England lost much of its political power, and the new religiosity that emerged in the 1550s was decidedly different from the version that had dominated previous to that. As Protestantism began to take hold in England the Catholic call of active and physical conversion lost most of its appeal and grip in England. The Protestant teachings of philanthropy, accountability, and restraint were not appealing to a class of men who had seen bravery in fighting for religion as an ideal way to prove their masculinity and devotion. These teachings were much more appealing to women, who had until then been generally unable to participate in the physical religiosity that had dominated England.

By the time of the Victorian era, rhetoric complaining about the femininity of Christianity was prominent, and men were uninterested in being faithful Christians,

because the teachings of peace seemed to directly contradict what Victorians considered the natural state of all good men because it seemed distinctly passive. This passivity contradicted Victorian standards for men of being brave and able protectors of their family, a decidedly active task. It was because Victorian ministers understood the alienation of men in the Church as a way of protecting their masculinity that men such as Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes began to coin the term “muscular Christianity.”⁴ This muscular Christianity was much more active and encouraged energetic evangelism such as missionary work.

The idea of missionary work as a way to display both a devotion for God, but also as a way to be included in the Biblical concept of “soldiers for Christ”⁵ that had been dormant for four hundred years. The passion that muscular Christianity inspired in men can be seen in Jane Eyre in St. John Rivers. He believed that the only way he would feel personally fulfilled was through missionary work and the novel, although somewhat critical of his methods, also never causes the reader to question the righteousness and bravery of his becoming a missionary.⁶ The idea that a man could prove himself through devotion and bravery in becoming a missionary was highly appealing to the Victorians and their understanding of how bravery was essential to masculinity.

⁴ Kimmel, Michael S; Aronson, Amy. *Men and Masculinities: A Social, Cultural and Historical Encyclopedia*. Web Publication: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2004. 557-558.

⁵ 2 Timothy 2:3

⁶ Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 2011. 449-456.

If feminine interpretations of the Bible were detrimental to the Victorian understanding of masculinity, the Bible's viewpoint of the inherent sin of homosexuality was upheld without falter. Homosexuality challenged essentially every aspect of what Victorians considered idealistic qualities in a man. A man who was homosexual could not demonstrate arguably the most important quality that a man should possess, the ability to protect his wife. Victorian belief also understood that if a man was homosexual, he was most certainly also lacking in physical strength, and more feminine than he was masculine.

Victorian writing seems to understand that public schools were a huge institutional challenge in the fight to instill manly qualities in young men. While young men were expected to be educated in order to be well rounded Victorians and display masculinity through intelligence, public schools where men were confined from their usual experimentation with women meant that they experienced their own sexuality while confined to a school of only other men. This led to the temptation of experimenting with men and becoming gay. The Victorians faced the task of reforming public schools to protect standards of masculinity. While traditionally literary emphasis was heavily based in the Greek classics, the problem of the highly homosexual relationships that were seemingly glorified left the school leadership in an uncomfortable position. Because of the impossibility of removing the Grecian classics from a well-rounded education, the classics were supplemented with traditional English stories about knights such as Lancelot and brave men like King Arthur.⁷

⁷ Girouard, Mark. *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman*. 170.

With all of the perceived challenges to Victorian masculinity it was a constant struggle to maintain the righteousness of those values in society, although most believed that it was essential to the survival of a good society that traditional masculinity be fought for and instilled in young men. This leads to the next aspect of masculinity in Victorian England, how Victorians fought back against the challenges to their values for men, and what was done to reinforce the culture of English manliness. There were three distinct and active methods that Victorians used to reinforce the ideals of masculinity in the nineteenth century. The action taken can be seen in the reaction of public school leaders to try to eradicate homosexuality and the homosexual culture in their systems, in the reiteration and glorification of social expectations through popular literature of the time period, and in the laws that were enacted during the time period.

It was because of this that sports were introduced into the curriculum for schools by John Percival, the headmaster of Clifton. He encouraged games because they, “developed manliness (about which he felt as fervently as any Victorian headmaster), but because they encouraged school pride and loyalty” They believed that by exhausting the students physically through activities that were competitive, they could revive the spirit of brotherhood formed in combat and through that, inspire masculinity in an increasingly homosexual environment.⁸ This reaction and mentality is perfectly logical when reminded that strength and ruggedness was essential to the qualities that made up the ideal Victorian man. Disappointingly to the school leaders, even with the change in the emphasis on physicality and sports, the problem of homosexuality continued to exist in

⁸ Girouard, Mark. *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman*. 172.

the public education system. To combat this, school leaders began to reduce the emphasis of the Grecian classics in their curriculums and instead focus on the old English stories that included Knights.

The balance of the relationships between Knights that was seen in popular stories written by Tennyson allowed the schools to continue to teach literature, but with a much more Victorian focus on relationships between men as manly and based in loyalty and brotherhood formed in combat, rather than homosexual relationships.⁹ It appears that the power of literature was not lost on the Victorians, and the agreement with their values and perceptions of masculinity were mirrored in popular novels at the time.

Because of the increasing emphasis on education for all classes during the Victorian era, a much higher level of the population were literate and the reading of novels began to dominate the era as a form of entertainment for both men and women of varying social status. Although reading of classics such as Greek epics generally remained a pastime of the elites, the popular literature of the Victorian era gives historians the ability to study various views of certain topics that while not being explicitly dealt with, reflect the social expectations of the period. The interest in Tennyson's writing that glorified the idea of traditional English masculinity as being equivalent to being a loyal soldier, a strong warrior, and intelligent displayed the English desire to return to the manliness of old, where a man could prove his masculinity through combat. The form of literature that was most popular with the populous during the Victorian era, however, were novels. Generally novels written during this time period that

⁹ Girouard, Mark. *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman*. 170.

were immensely popular dealt with romance, love and marriage. To support the concept of romance, it was essential that the novels discuss the qualities of the males in the books so that the readers could understand their motives and determine whether or not the author intended for the reader to approve or disapprove of a character. The methods and qualities that authors used to show that a character was either good or bad can be used to determine what qualities were most important to Victorians in determining what qualities of masculinity were essential for a male to be considered a good man.

There are many novels that compare and contrast both good and bad men. This is helpful when readers remember that the Victorian understanding of masculinity was constantly in flux. Men did not have to display all aspects of masculinity perfectly in order to be considered good, manly, men. They did, however, have to make up for qualities that they lacked in order to still be sympathetic characters by having another manly characteristic that could be so strong as to balance out the deficiency in that area. One book that shows imperfect men who are redeemed of their shortcomings in certain qualities by having strength in other qualities is *North and South* by Elizabeth Gaskell. In her novel readers are faced with four men who are imperfect in different ways. Mr. Hale is unable to support his family financially, Fredrick Hale is deemed unpatriotic because of his mutiny, Mr. Thorton is proud to a fault, and Nicholas Higgins is unable to support his family financially as well as somewhat emotionally unstable.¹⁰ Through Elizabeth Gaskell's dissection of these characters, she makes them sympathetic to Victorian readers,

¹⁰ Gaskell, Elizabeth. *North and South*. London: Penguin Books, 1995.

even with their shortcomings in values that were essential to the Victorian understanding of a manly and therefore righteous man. The complexity in defining manliness can be seen in all of these cases where Gaskell creates sympathy by giving them an excess of another manly character that redeems them. In the case of Mr. Hale, his financial ruin of his family does not make him an unlikeable character because he chose his downfall to maintain his moral integrity. In the same way Fredrick is also redeemed because of the morality of his actions in defying his superior's unjust treatment. Mr. Thornton demonstrates that although a man can be too proud, if his intentions are still righteous, in this case his love for Margaret and desire to protect her, he is an admirable man. Finally even Nicholas Higgins is a good man by Elizabeth Gaskell's, and Victorian's standards because even his faults spring from a desire to protect the women and children around him.¹¹

The changeability of the Victorian definition of masculinity and what levels of each characteristic of manliness that a man needs to have in order to be considered ideal only further demonstrates why it is so difficult to pinpoint the exact definition of masculinity to the Victorians. While it is obviously essential for the men in novels of the time period to demonstrate the list of qualities previously enumerated, the characteristics that can be substituted and still constitute a good man seem to be intrinsically understood, rather than actually being able to be explicitly stated. It is important to note that men who fall short of the standards that Victorian males were held to, and still wanted to marry the woman they loved in the novels had to overcome their own flaws in order to achieve their

¹¹ Gaskell, Elizabeth. *North and South*.

happy endings. In *Middlemarch* readers see Fred struggle to overcome his financial irresponsibility in order to be worthy of the woman he loves.¹² In *Jane Eyre* Rodham has to overcome the sins of his past and his lies to Jane in order to be worthy of her love and able to have a happy ending.

One major manifestation of masculinity in Victorian England can be seen through the laws and the rhetoric surrounding those laws. The laws created during the nineteenth century are a demonstration of men's need to protect the women around them. Acts like the Miners and Collieries Act, passed in eighteen forty-two, had one specific purpose, the preservation of helpless women. The concept that it was the duty of the men who made the laws to protect women and children from danger was very Victorian in nature. The legislation also served to bolster already existing expectations of masculinity, that good men would be more suited to the dangerous jobs that legislators deemed too dangerous for women and children. In the, article Constant Contradictions, Philippa Levine argues that,

“In easing women out of segments of the workforce protective legislation both served to entrench a model of work culture more and more male in definition and set up a logical continuum of protection in which women were subsumed within a protective custody – protected from the corruption of public participation by legislation as well as

¹² Eliot, George. *Middlemarch*. London: Penguin Classics, 1871.

by marriage. Marriage remained grounded in this period, of course, in the doctrine of coverture, according men and women respectively the role of protector and protected.”¹³ The laws of protection further demonstrate how the concept of masculinity defined the Victorian period. These laws changed the lives of thousands of families and maintained a public understanding of what were appropriate roles for men and women in all society. This legislative expression of masculinity and social expectations for males defined gender roles and the future of industrialization for England.

Men’s ability to shape the lives of women through laws designed to protect them was not the only way in which men’s expression of their manliness affected the lives of women during the Victorian era. Expectations placed on Victorian men to constantly be proving their manliness through a display of masculine qualities meant that the role of women changed dramatically. Gender roles became much more polarized during the nineteenth century as a result of this expression. Women were also expected to enhance the masculine qualities of the men in their lives, without challenging those qualities. Finally the manifestation of masculinity in Victorian lives could even be seen in things as simple as spaces and their purposes.

Gender roles became extremely polarized in the Victorian era initially because of the Industrial Revolution. The Revolution caused a sharp decline in the number of families who supported themselves agriculturally. In almost all of English history women could be seen working alongside their husbands because they were essential to the

¹³ Levine, Philippa. “Consistent contradictions: Prostitution and protective labor legislation in nineteenth-century England” *Social History Vol.* (1994): 23.

survival of the family as viable workers. Initialization meant working as wage laborers and in much more specialized fields. This type of work was initially seen as inappropriate for women, as well as not financially beneficial in many middle class cases. In order for families to make the most out of the wages, it was often more cost effective for women to stay at home where they could raise the children and had the ability to wait outside of markets for hours in order to buy the cheapest and best food while spending the least amount of money possible. Steinbeck writes, “Keeping the family respectable- by constant cleaning, mending of clothes, careful shopping, budget-conscious cooking, and the like-was so time-consuming that some working-class women found it made more financial sense to confine themselves to unpaid family labor.¹⁴ The polarization of gender roles also meant that women were expected to be the perfect examples of feminine qualities in order to exemplify the manliness of their husbands so that the men could feel fulfilled while their opportunities to show their masculinity continued to dwindle.

Any action made by a woman that challenged the masculinity of her husband was seen as both publically embarrassing and emasculating. Because the ability of a man to actively demonstrate his masculinity was seldom as obvious as it had been in the time of knights and battles, his ability to protect and provide for his family became his public expression of his merit. This meant that a woman’s interference in this duty, although potentially in her best interest, was totally discouraged by society. Any action taken by women on their own behalf was not seen by society as simply self-preservation, but actually as a sign that they distrusted the man who had the charge of protecting them to

¹⁴ Steinbach, Susie L. *Understanding the Victorians*. 119.

be able to fulfill that role. If women publicly demonstrated that they did not trust the man in their life to meet the expectations of Victorian manliness.

Any affirmative action taken by a woman in a situation for her own benefit or even the benefit of her child, taken publicly, would bring her husband's status as a man into question, and bring disrepute on his name. Because the fates of women were so intimately tied with their husbands, an action that caused him to lose respect in the eyes of other men because his manliness, and therefore status in society. It was because of the damage that could be done to both the husband's social status, and the status of the family and wife because of their inseparable ties, that the preservation of the image of the man as being the ideal of masculinity was so important for a woman to uphold.

In the novel *Middlemarch* written by George Elliot present day readers can glimpse how the interference of a wife on behalf of her husband left him open to public humiliation by even his relatives. Who went so far as to say that having his wife write to ask for money was a "roundabout wheedling sort of thing which I should not have credited you with. I never choose to write to a women about matters on business."¹⁵ The dialogue expressed in this letter further serves to support the idea that men who were not able to be self-sufficient, especially in economic matters, and allowed themselves to be represented in public by their wives lost respect in the eyes of other men who were then allowed to public question their masculinity.

The separate spheres of men and women extended not only to societal expectations of their public roles, but also to how space became a division between men

¹⁵ Eliot, George. *Middlemarch*. 664.

and women. Space, because of women's roles as agricultural workers declining, meant that they were increasingly confined to the home. Places in the city were deemed either masculine or feminine and although men had the ability to move in those different areas with more freedom, the home became the realm of women and the family and the man was expected to have a passive and not very participatory role in the home. The domestic problems that dominated the house were typically seen feminine, and for a man to be involved in them would challenge his ability to be masculine. Instead of being an observer who would step in only in the case of protection of those in his care, who quietly and reliably made sure that financial needs were met, a man who became involved in the home life would be tainting himself by bringing on added stress that would challenge his emotional stability. Because of the rigidity and subtlety of what was deemed manly, it was even more important for women to perfectly fulfill their roles and stay in the spaces where they were allowed. This space separation can be witnessed in several novels of the period.

In *North and South* readers saw that Margaret Hale's action of being out with an unknown man after dark tainted her character in the eyes of Mr. Thornton.¹⁶ In *The Woman in White* the Laura and Marian were not allowed to travel unaccompanied, it was Walter Hartright that had the task of restoring Laura's name without the public help of Marian, even though it was Laura's estate, simply because women were not allowed into that space or sphere because of the Victorian fear that they would either be contaminated by the negative aspects of the masculinity of the sphere or that they would taint the space

¹⁶ Gaskell, Elizabeth. *North and South*. 264.

with their femininity.¹⁷ In *Middlemarch* the concept that Dorothea should not be alone because it meant that she would be generally confined to her house. Although George Eliot demonstrates her understanding of the difficulty that women had by their confinement through a comment made by Mrs. Cadwallar, “You will certainly go mad in that house alone, my dear. You will see visions. We have all got to exert ourselves a little to keep sane.”¹⁸ In *Jane Eyre* she understood that her moral integrity would be questioned when people understood that she was a woman traveling alone after she had left the safety of Mr. Roderick’s home. Because of that many people in the town where she escaped to were distrustful of her, because a woman who traveled outside of the accepted spaces without the protection of a man was a challenge to Victorian understanding of space.¹⁹ Even prominent newspapers of the time such as the *Guardian* were peppered with rhetoric from Parliament that included dialogue that said, “Reference had been made to what had been called the spherical argument, that was that the sphere of man and that of woman was entirely difficult.” and then went on to enumerate the physical spaces that were being tainted by a mingling of the sexes, such as schools.²⁰

This paper has explored what social structures and aspects challenged the dominance of traditional masculinity, enumerated ways in which Victorians reinforced

¹⁷ Collins, Wilkie. *The Woman in White*. London: Sampson Low, 1860.

¹⁸ Eliot, George. *Middlemarch*.

¹⁹ Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. 336-370.

²⁰ “Women's Disabilities Royal Bill.” *The Manchester Guardian (1828-1900)*, Apr 27, 1876.

the culture of masculinity, and then how the expectations placed upon Victorian men to meet these standards affected women's roles in society. Through all of these studies one conclusion can be made, the concept of masculinity was essential to the entire history of the nineteenth century in England. Although it was a definition in flux, the demand for men to exhibit their masculinity to achieve social respect meant significant changes in politics, literature, education and women's roles. The social pressure to be the perfect Victorian man through the demonstration of masculinity was the driving factor in every aspect of what we now consider Victorianism.

The definition of masculinity to the Victorians was extremely complex and constantly able to be slightly altered in accordance with public opinion. Despite all of this masculinity was defined by several traits, bravery, intelligence, physical strength, emotional independence, financial responsibility, and a strong sense of morality. The most important aspect of these traits in creating the ideal Victorian male was that they came together for the benefit of his dependents, and especially his wife. In Victorian England the historical struggle between men trying to assert their superiority over other men was fought on this proverbial battlefield. A man's possession of all of the Victorian values became his weapon in the fight, and his adeptness at exerting each value at the proper time, with the proper audience, was how he then became superior to all other men and won the war.

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