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Jack Vanden Berg

*Dordt College*

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# The Victorian Age: An Age of Purity or of Hypocrisy?

Jack Vanden Berg  
Associate Professor of English



*Jack Vanden Berg is an Associate Professor of English at Dordt College. A graduate of Calvin College, he earned a Master's degree at the University of Iowa and is retiring at the end of this academic year.*

The Victorian Age, we are told, was an age in which membership in a church was expected of everyone; members were to attend two services each Sunday; spare time on Sunday and during the week was spent reading sermons and religious periodicals; the master or the mistress of the upper and middle class families led evening services for the family and the servants. It was a religious age.

It was also a moral age. Books were chosen carefully for members of the family and especially for the girls, for they were not to be

exposed to unwholesome thoughts or ideas that would deprave or corrupt them; this standard, too, was maintained rigorously. Moreover, Victorian ladies were so proper that when they consulted a doctor, they took dolls along to show the doctor precisely where their aches and pains were located. It was an age of propriety and formality, an age in which Queen Victoria squelched any attempt at levity with the regal rebuke "We are not amused."

But the Victorian Age did not enjoy a unitary culture nor was its literature the expression of a

single culture. In his book entitled *The Other Victorians*, Steven Marcus states that several cultures existed at the same time: rural, urban, provincial, non-conformist, aristocratic, middle class, reformist and especially subcultures of pornography and prostitution that were ignored by most Victorians (22). Mayhew, in his blue book on the London poor (circa, 1861) estimated that there were 50,000 prostitutes in England and Scotland, of which 8,000 lived in London.

Walter Houghton in *The Victorian Frame of Mind* states that Dr. William Acton, a medical specialist of the Victorian Age, arrived at the same numbers as Mayhew and felt that sexual license was increasing: "In urban and in rural life, seduction was a sport and a habit with vast numbers of men, married or single" (365). So in the Victorian Age we find that strange anomaly—an ultra religious and moral age in which pornography, prostitution, and sexual license ran rampant, but in secret.

Various cultural reasons for this strange contradictory situation existed. Once a Victorian woman had been seduced, an unforgiving society left her with no alternative but to turn to prostitution to support herself. Secondly, the starvation wages paid to women left few economic alternatives. A short illness could impoverish a Victorian working woman. Thirdly, the maintenance of large armed forces whose members, except for officers, were not allowed to marry, and the social ambitions of the age required the postponement of marriage until a young man could afford to live like a gentleman or until he was discharged from the armed forces (Marcus, 365-6). Consequently, for some women, prostitution was the only means of physical survival.

Pornography and pornographic material had been present in English culture since the days of Chaucer but until the growth of a greater reading and viewing public, pornography had not been widely disseminated. But with the appearance of the first highly successful pornographic novel, Cleland's *Fanny Hill* (1748), pornographic material began to attract a greater audience. H. Montgomery Hyde states that "ironically the flow of erotic and por-

nographic books and prints flourished most when the Obscene Publication Act was passed by Parliament in 1857" (171). This act instituted a new censorship in England and mandated magistrates to act as censors. But the stricter Victorian morality became and the more rigid censorship became, the more the underground trade flourished.

At the same time Victorians felt great concern about the sexual mores of their age. The popularity of the literature of prostitution and the appearance of pornographic elements in the writings of George Sand, Gautier, Baudelaire, and Zola caused Victorians to fear the influence of their works. In addition, the philosophy and practice of "free love" was being strongly advocated by the Utopian Socialists such as Godwin, Mary Wollstonecroft, Fourier, Robert Owen, and the Saint-Simonians. The increase of sexual license and the prevalence of pornography and prostitution impelled the Victorians to take action.

In this crisis the Church of England was no help. Totally unprepared for the double onslaught of Darwin's theory of evolution and the emergence of higher criticism from the continent, they found themselves also having to deal with the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution: the earlier closing of the Commons, with its consequent destruction of cottage industries and the subsequent migration of cottage industry workers to large industrial centers had already occurred. Away from the spiritual and legal influence of their parsons and squires, the workers abused their unaccustomed freedom, becoming alcoholics, drug addicts, and behaving badly. And the women were left to the "tender mercies" of tight-fisted employers who paid poorly and fired workers at will at a time when a few shillings of pay could force a choice between semi-starvation or prostitution. Thus economics forced some women to be wilder, looser, "faster."

For the upper and middle class the effect of evolution and higher criticism left all in doubt. Was man the crown of creation or an animal? Was the Bible fact or fiction, time-bound or applicable to all times? What was the center and basis of authority? On what was morality to be

based? Meanwhile sexual license, pornography, and prostitution were increasing and the institution of marriage was being attacked either overtly or inadvertently through marriages of convenience, marriages for money and for social position. Moreover, the emotion-starving rationalism of which John Stuart Mill complained and the pressures of business dehumanized men and reduced them to Wemmicks and Jagers, with mechanical robotlike faces and knee jerk responses to stimuli.

The result was a cultural substitute for religion, epitomized in Coventry Patmore's poem *The Angel in the House* (c. 1858) which

to redeem her husband from weakness and vice" (344).

Houghton states that "this woman worship... was as much indebted to the need for fresh sources of moral inspiration as it was to Romanticism in general" (350). But whatever its source and *raison d'être*, this worship of women exalted women—they were to be pure and chaste women who never had an impure sexual thought or, if they did, would suppress it promptly. But the skeleton in the closet was sex (353). No one mentioned it; no teacher, no parent, no minister ever talked of or even mentioned sex to the Victorian child or explained

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best expressed the new cultural myth. The center of the home was to be the family—families were to worship in church together, to go on vacations together, to read together in their spare time, and to spend most of their time in the home, a place of peace and certainty, a refuge from a world full of doubt and uncertainty, a sacred temple (Houghton, 342-3).

In the home was the "Angel"—the wife. Immaculately pure, neither utterly submissive nor an abrasive fighter for women's rights, she had her own function which was to guide and uplift her more worldly and intellectual mate...." She was to be an "infallible, faithful and wise counsellor who by her wisdom and virtue was

the nature and function of the reproductive system. As far as the Victorian child knew, he or she was either immaculately conceived or brought by a stork (355). Women were viewed as the objects of the greatest respect and even awe; so greatly were they revered that autobiographies of the time mention that the adolescent males regarded women so highly that they felt that marriage for a woman was an act of degradation on her part. Chastity was expected of both sexes, and, after marriage, complete fidelity.

One of the sources of this new ethos was the Evangelical movement which was reacting to the licentiousness of the time. It was, however,

not entirely a middle class movement, for John Henry Newman (later to become Cardinal Newman), who was neither evangelical nor middle class by birth, was also upset over the licentiousness of his age. Almost everyone supported the ideals of the movement sincerely. It resulted in a censorship that acted unwisely at times but was neither hypocritical nor prudish, for it was sincerely intended to protect and support the code of chastity and to insure that no one would be corrupted (Houghton, 357). Even Charlotte Bronte, who had herself received criticism for her openness in writing about sexual passion, felt that Shakespeare's comedies and Byron's *Don Juan* should not be read, and George Eliot opposed permitting everyone to read Shakespeare in the original. Both Eliot and Bronte supported reading Bowdler's expurgated Shakespeare entitled *Family Shakespeare*. Leslie Stephens wrote that prudery is a bad thing, but in his opinion it was not as bad as "the prurience of Sterne, the laxness of Fielding, the unwholesome atmosphere of Balzac" (Houghton, 357-8).

The point is that censorship was strongly supported not because of hypocrisy or prudery but because *everyone* agreed that the *moral purity of the family* had to be preserved.

But the movement lost its valiant battle since it was fighting a change to a more open attitude toward sex. The production of pornographic material initiated by the publication of *Fanny Hill* increased rapidly in England, reaching its height in the late Victorian period and continuing in the twentieth century. To what extent the concentrated drive for money, power, and success contributed to the increase in pornography is difficult to assess, but certainly the dehumanization depicted in Dickens', Thackeray's, and Trollope's novels caused some to read pornographic literature.

Since the Marquis De Sade's pioneering in sadistic literature, pornography had contained an element of sadistic perversion, but with the addition of masochistic strands, the pornography of perversion became more prominent. In England, flagellation became so popular that according to Hyde, "flogging establishments were established in London to

which the highest in the land would resort" (127). England's peculiar education practices also contributed to this problem in two ways. According to Matthew Arnold's own testimony as a government inspector of schools, homosexual practices were engaged in frequently in the all-male boarding schools for upper and middle class boys. In addition, the frequent and severe canings and birchings for the sake of discipline led schoolchildren to discover the "sexual pleasures" of flagellation, sadism, and masochism. Of course, said Hyde, many of its alumni became purchasers and consumers of pornography (134).

The Pre-Raphaelite movement in art and literature, which began as a movement that emphasized pictorial detail and accuracy, in its latter days became somewhat pornographic, especially in Aubrey Beardsley's works which consisted of paintings of women with cruel red lips and sadistically sensuous expressions in their eyes. They depicted a morbid voluptuousness and suggested guilty passions. And so the Victorian period ended with pornography steadily increasing despite valiant attempts to censor and/or to destroy the most offensive works. The Evangelical movement had failed in its efforts to restore morality.

The question that remains unanswered is why Victorian morality could not cope with the deluge of pornography. They tried with the best intentions and with great energy but they did not succeed.

Perhaps the battle was lost for several reasons. The Industrial Revolution brought about the growth of large urban centers in which greater sexual license thrived. Instead of retaining a sense of the wholeness of life, the Victorians split sexuality away from the rest of life.

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