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THE MYTH OF VICTORIAN PRUDERY: PROMOTING AN IMAGE

BY NINA CLEMENTS '01

Historiography, the process of analyzing the primary and secondary historical documents of a period, enables modern history students to place the past in a context with the present. With the current discussion and debate concerning modern American morality, the historiography of the Victorian period has been the subject of much question. The term "Victorian" refers to England and the United States from 1837- 1901, characterized by the rule of Queen Victoria (*OED*).

Specifically, the morality and beliefs in question are those of the Victorian bourgeoisie (middle class). Though only comprising 12-15 per cent of the population they influenced both the lower and upper classes by their emphasis on propriety and etiquette. The process of historiography lends itself to the Victorian period because of the many myths and stereotypes surrounding it. The most lasting stereotype of the Victorian is as simultaneously a prude and hypocrite. Yet, depending upon the source, the Victorian has been either praised for his moral piety, innocence and work ethic, or chastised for his hypocrisy, prudery and repression. Prolific bouts of criticism come from the Pre/Post WWI period (the Post-Victorians), the post WWII period (historians who wrote during 1950s through the early 1970s), and the Contemporary period (historians who wrote during the 1980s and 1990s). By reading criticism from these time periods, one can redefine Victorian stereotypes and come to another conclusion about them. Victorians were not prudes or hypocrites, but combated the industrial changes and confusion of their society by dwelling in separate spheres that shielded the individual from the uncertainty of the public realms.

Historians, rather than the Victorians, promoted images of prudery. Historians did not view the Victorian from both of its realms: the public and private sphere, which indicated the Victorian was a person in conflict; searching for meaning in life. By ignoring private sources and by focusing on extreme

and non-representative sources, historians promoted a convincing, but one-sided view of the Victorians as prudes. WWI generation sources condemned and reacted against the Victorians while the Post-WWII generation also criticized and condemned the Victorian. However, they utilized public sources to reinforce their pre-conceived notion that Victorians, due to their separate spheres, were hypocrites. Contemporary historians like Peter Gay and Karen Lystra provided the most encompassing and comprehensive view of the Victorians by utilizing both public and private sources in their analyses.

Although the Victorians were stereotyped as prudes, that definition has evolved over time; different historians gave the word different connotations. The word "prude" was not consolidated into the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of Victorian until 1934 and 1950, which suggests that definition was consolidated between the WWI and WWII generations (*OED*). Webster's 1965 edition defined a prude as "a person who is excessively or priggishly attentive to propriety or decorum: a woman who shows or affects extreme modesty" (688). Rattray Taylor (a Post WWII historian) defined a prude as "one who pretends to an ignorance he or she does not possess" (26).

Hypocrisy, another component of the Victorian stereotype of prudery also has several evolving definitions. Webster defined hypocrisy as "feigning to be what one is not or to believe what is not: false assumption of an appearance of virtue or religion" (410). Taylor believed prudery and hypocrisy were interrelated and, at times, interchangeable. He emphasized that this "Victorian insistence upon the appearance of respectability without reality . . . gained England a name for hypocrisy" (26). Yet, Peter Gay, a contemporary historian, redefined hypocrites as those who hunted out other hypocrites. Gay also made use of Freud's explanation of "cultural hypocrisy" by elaborating that hypocrisy is not duplicity, but is necessary for the sustenance of society (406).

The Myth of Victorian Prudery

The historiography of the terms illustrates that the definitions have changed, so have viewpoints and for a variety of reasons.

WWI historians consolidated the view of Victorians as prudish; a stereotype that would continue to be elaborated upon by countless other historians. Both WWI and Pre-WWI historians generally reacted against the prudery, hypocrisy and repression of Victorian society and condemned them. Aside from the natural tendency of any age to react against the one preceding it, the Post-Victorians were more vehemently reactive against the Victorians because their separate-sphere society left them unprepared for the atrocities and hardships of war. The Post-Victorians, as a result of war and of the Social Purity movement of the 1890s, were a transition period between the separate spheres of the Victorians and the merged public/private sphere of the Post-WWII generation.

The Social Purity Movement, which occurred during the 1890s was, in actuality, the beginning of "Victorian" or prudish behavior (Fisher 377). The moralists, or what Gay called the "prurient prude (Gay 78)," began to force the strict standards of the public onto the private sphere, which caused what late twentieth century historians would call the psychoses of the period (Fisher 377). Scandals, such as the trial of Oscar Wilde, became a "mechanism by which boundaries of respectable behaviors were established" (Fisher 377). The fear and mania of masturbation during this decade further represented the fear of public ignorance of the private realm, which illustrated the projection of public values and anxieties onto the private realm (Lystra 106). These anxieties and manias signaled the end of the public sphere; scandals and anxieties encouraged talk of private matters in the public realm, and made the private realm, with the aid of Social Purity Societies, the concern of the public. What was also significant about the Social Purity movement was that it lasted only ten years, but unfairly characterized an entire era. Because of WWI reactions against the Social Purity Movement, later historians perceived and defined the Victorians as prudes.

Annie Windsor Allen, a Pre-WWI historian, sympathized with, and explained the origination of Victorian prudery. Rather than conform to the emerging trend of criticizing the Victorians, Allen chose to explain them. The foundation for what critics call prudery is rooted in the Evangelical or Pre-Victorian

age. She attributed Victorian ideals to the Evangelical reaction to the vulgarity of the previous generation (12). The Evangelicals, and later the Victorians, believed that sacred topics should not be mentioned in public. Allen did not consider this prudery, but a respect for what modern historian Karen Lystra would call the true self (14). The goal of the Evangelical movement was to create a society, "to keep [the] youth fresh and sound-hearted" (14). Because of their desire for purity and family wholesomeness, they developed and adhered to standards of etiquette and decorum. Allen believed the negative image of Victorian prudery, "or the worst Victorian hypocrisy," originated with a small percentage of individuals who were unable to live up to the high ideals of the Evangelicals, and then the Victorians (15, 12).

Allen viewed the current dissipation of society, which was the transitional period before the Post-WWI age, as a result of the passage of time. She defined the different ages of the Victorian: the Pre-Victorian, or Evangelical was born in 1780; the Mid-Victorian was born in 1810, the Late-Victorian was born in 1840 and the Post-Victorian was born a generation later (12). The practices of the Evangelicals were passed down, but as the years progressed their convictions were lost. The result was that the Post-Victorian, raised by Victorians, "looked and doubted," because he was unaware of the reasoning behind the prudery and rigid standards of his society (13).

The image of Victorian prudery was consolidated at the turn of the century by the Post-Victorian era, or Pre-WWI era. The Pre-WWI Post-WWI period or Lost Generation was one of the most reactionary periods of history. Edmund Gosse, a Post-Victorian with deeply rooted Victorian influences, believed Post-Victorians only attacked the Victorians because they were reacting against all things Victorian: it was the fashion. He observed "for a considerable time past everybody must have noticed, especially in private conversation, a growing tendency to disparagement and even ridicule of all . . . things, and aspects of things which can be defined [as] Victorian" (1). Lytton Strachey, an eminent Post-Victorian was no exception. Strachey revealed in his biography *Eminent Victorians* his contempt of the Victorians, evident through Edmund Gosse's review. Gosse observed (referring to Strachey) that "our younger contemporaries are slipping into the habit of approv-

ing of nothing from the moment that they. . . [discover]. . . it is Victorian (1). Despite the stereotypes that all who lived during the Victorian period were resentful and repressed, this acknowledged trend of Post-Victorian criticism was not a universal one.

Virginia Woolf, another Post-Victorian writer, made the important differentiation between Late and Post Victorians. She represented the transition between the repression of the Victorians, with the freedom of the Post Victorian. Through her discussion in "Old Bloomsbury" of life at Hyde Park Gate, she illustrated the repression of the Victorian age. She was criticized for talking too much about emotions at dinner and for her lack of emotional control (159). According to Annie Windsor Allen "self control was essential to a virtuous life," and was a staple of the Victorian ideal (16). Virginia described the atmosphere at Hyde Park Gate as "[being] full of love and marriage. George's engagement,. . . Gerald's innumerable flirtations were all discussed either privately or openly with the greatest interest" (169). She contrasted this repression with the intellectual revolution of Bloomsbury: "In the world of the Booths and Maxses [Hyde Park] we were not asked to use our brains much. Here we used nothing else" (168). In contrast to the presence of love at Hyde Park Gate, ". . . at Gordon Square[in Bloomsbury] love was never mentioned. Love had no existence" (169). Perhaps the freedom from love at Gordon Square could be attributed to another reason: the presence of "buggers" (Woolf 174). Virginia wrote that "it never struck me that the abstractness, the simplicity which had been so great a relief after Hyde Park Gate were largely due to the fact that the majority of young men who came [to Bloomsbury] were not attracted by young women" (172). She described the society and intellectual conversations of these buggers as a relief from the "outer world of dinners and dances," which acknowledged the relief she felt in her privacy. Even at the outset of the post-Victorian period, spheres were still separate (172).

Woolf noted that with Lytton Strachey's utterance of the word "Semen . . . all barriers of reticence and reserve went down. A flood of the sacred fluid seemed to overwhelm us. Sex permeated conversation" (173). The 'sex' she was referring to was homosexual, rather than heterosexual sex. Historians have interpreted this passage to symbolize the breakdown of all unnatural Victorian prudery and repression.

Another interpretation of this scene was that the barriers limiting *homosexuality*, not sexuality, were destroyed for Virginia. The relief felt by Virginia and the freedom she felt was in reaction to the Social Purity Movement, not the Victorian period. It was during this period, which immediately preceded the Post-Victorians, that repression on a new level occurred. The Social Purity Movement prevented candid discussion of sexuality, and especially homosexuality, in the private realm because of the imposition of public standards onto the private realm.

Another Post-Victorian article addressed the ambivalence expressed on the subject of Victorians. *The New Statesman* article, "The Victorian" in some respects condemned the Victorian, but posed the question of whether or not the WWI generation was more Victorian than the Victorian itself (182). To pose that question indicated that the post-Victorians were not all as free as extremists like Virginia Woolf have recorded. The article was written in 1917, well beyond the close of the Victorian age, yet there was difficulty in reaching a consensus on the Victorian age, which disputed the idea that all Post-Victorians came to the consensus that Victorians were prudish and repressed.

The author of this article supported the image of the Victorian at his worst, a hypocrite: "as the person who in all history had the greatest opportunities of putting into practice the politics of generosity and who, with a virtuous face, almost consistently put into practice the politics of selfishness" (181). People resented this hypocrisy, it "[was] his virtuous face, rather than his sins, that the world [found] . . . difficult to forgive" (181). But perhaps the world of 1917 found it difficult to forgive the Victorian and idealized him at the same time because Post-Victorians lived in a world of disillusionment, a world of war without hope and were a people looking for someone to blame.

It is easy to perceive Victorians as prudes by reading the above sources. However, sympathetic Victorian analysts, like Annie Windsor Allen, disproved Gosse's theory of the universal rejection of all things Victorian. Yet, Annie Windsor Allen's sympathetic view can also be attributed to the fact that she wrote before WWI, and was unaffected by its disillusionment. Also, Gosse's disapproval of Strachey's condemnation supported the idea that while WWI historians consolidated the stereotype of

prudery, it was a subject of debate during their own time period. Although these sources were public, they were extreme and not necessarily representative of the WWI generation; two of the authors, Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf were in the same literary circle. For instance, although *Old Bloomsbury* was a memoir, it was meant for the public realm. Other articles, like Gosse's review of *Eminent Victorians* and *The New Statesman* article appeared in public journals. The ideas these sources discussed originated in the Victorian public realm and contained no evidence or support from the private realm. Therefore, creating rather than reflecting a vision of the Victorian period, these historians did not present a comprehensive view of the Victorians, but a reaction against them.

Like WWI historians, later twentieth century historians generally confirmed the Victorian stereotypes of prudery/hypocrisy, repression and Victorian duplicity, but attempted to add a psychological dimension to their analyses, distinguishing them from the arbitrary reactionism of their WWI generation counterparts. Although they acknowledged the existence of a private sphere, they condemned it as hypocritical and they utilized sources from the public realm, assuming that they were representative of them.

One twentieth century historian, Ronald Pearsall, did not question the stereotype of Victorian repression, but reprimanded it with his statement that repressed desire naturally lead to the Victorian fear and anxiety of sex so obviously commonplace during the Victorian age (416). His analysis was similar to Freud's idea that sexual thoughts and fantasies were unacceptable to the conscious Victorian mind and were therefore repressed (422). Pearsall referred to the exploits of a British voyeur, the notorious Captain Marryat, when he cited "one of the clichés of the period was the way sexual disgruntlement was expressed by hiding the legs of pianos and tables with coverings. Furniture legs were equated with human legs" (423). Pearsall did not challenge this account or the existence of similar scenes, but believed this incident was representative of an entire society. He believed "it was possible not to talk about sex; it was more difficult not to think about it. One had to pretend one was not thinking about it. The result was repression," or the psychoses of the Victorian period (422).

Ratray Taylor upheld the image of the Victo-

rian at his worst, as the stereotypical repressor and the hypocrite (23). Taylor defined prudery as the constant obsession of sex combined with a false sense of innocence and disgust (26). He utilized magazines and other public sources to determine that all Victorians regarded women "as pure and sexless" (21). Taylor connected the stereotypes of sexlessness (passionlessness) and repression to the Victorian ideals of civilization. According to the *Gentleman's Magazine* of 1791 (which was an Evangelical source), Victorians regarded themselves as more civilized than the preceding century. They were "everyday becoming more delicate, and without a doubt, at the same time more virtuous; and shall, . . . become the most refined and polite people in the world" (21). Taylor believed "the Victorian saw sex not so much as something sinful, but as something bestial, something disgusting. Besides which, conceiving himself as rational, he distrusted an activity which was so evidently not under rational control" (21). Taylor further supported the stereotype that women did not possess any sexual passion. "It was a cold statement of supposed fact", . . . according to Acton, a notorious Victorian sexologist, that it was a "vile aspersion" to say that women were capable of sexual feeling" (22). He also supported the stereotype that Victorians used euphemisms because "the taboo was extended further and further, so that actions and objects only remotely connected with sex could not be named, but must be referred to periphrastically. In time, even the periphrases became objectionable and had to be replaced by expressions even more circuitous" (23). The use of euphemisms is the ultimate symptom of Victorian prudery. However, according to Peter Gay, euphemism have been recorded in British history as early as the seventeenth century, which invalidated the theory that euphemisms were indicative of repression; they were indicative of habit (407).

Late twentieth century critic Duncan Crow, affirmed "boredom and brutality", as well as prudery, hypocrisy, and snobbishness as characteristics of life in Early-Victorian Britain (33). According to Crow, "it is easy to despise Victorian hypocrisy, and the whole euphemistic approach that went with it, forgetting that this blinkered attitude was adopted to hide the proximity of the abyss in which seethed the primitive society the Victorians were struggling away from (33). For the Victorians, "to acknowledge the existence of vice, was, they believed, to en-

courage it (33). Crow, like Taylor, also accepted the validity of past sources without questioning their motives or their accuracy. For example, Crow accepted the findings of the British Captain Marryat from his book, *A Diary in America* (1839). Marryat wrote that "Americans objected to everything nude in statuary" (36). Marryat's most famous criticism of the Americans was his discovery at a lady's school: "On being ushered into the reception room, conceive my astonishment at beholding a square piano-forte with four limbs, . . . [which was the mistress's] care to preserve in their utmost purity the ideas of the young ladies under her charge, she had dressed all these four limbs in modest little trousers with frills at the bottom of them!" (36). To Crow and to most other Victorian historians, "these piano legs . . . became the symbol of prudery" (36). What Crow failed to mention, however, was Captain Marryat's licentious experiences during his visit, and the personal attacks by Americans he received as a result. Perhaps he had more reason than his observations to condemn Americans as prudes (Lystra 56).

While these twentieth century historians were not merely reacting against the Victorians, like the WWI generation writers, they did not utilize private sources to reach the conclusion that Victorians were prudes and hypocrites. While their psychological analyses strengthened their arguments, these historians only examined public sources superficially, without attempting to view the Victorian from his own dichotomized existence of separate spheres. This illustrated not only their unreliability as authorities on Victorians, but the influence of their merged public and private spheres. To these historians, anything less 'open' than their own society was prudish and hypocritical.

The above ideas and stereotypes of the WWI and post WWII generation were the standard interpretations of Victorian prudery. However, they are only interpretations and can be subject to re-interpretation. Contemporary historians like Peter Gay and Karen Lystra did not deny Victorian prudery and hypocrisy, but attempted to explain it. They examined sources from both the public and private realms in order to dispel the myth of prudery and to present other images of the Victorian. The Victorian that Gay and Lystra presented was a Victorian in conflict, passionate and in search of the true self, desperately seeking stability in an uncertain world.

In his book, *Education of the Senses*, Peter Gay used Freudian analysis to dispel and explain stereotypes of the Victorian Prude and Hypocrite. Freud defined hypocrisy as an ambivalence in the societal expectations of man (420). According to Freud, any man in civilization was an unconscious hypocrite (418). In his book, Gay represented the Victorian not as a conventional hypocrite, but as a complex being pulled between the Freudian concepts of the id (desire and instincts of the individual) and the Superego (the pressures of the family and society), searching for knowledge and meaning and life.

The elements of the Victorian bourgeoisie, through the lens of Freudian theory, society were: "the pangs of sex, the pressures of technology, the anxieties of physicians, the risks of pregnancy, the passion for privacy . . . [and] man's fear of woman" (459). Gay believed that Victorians educated themselves through their senses by building upon Freudian concepts of infantile sensory education and awareness and through acceptance of the superego. Gay's use of Freud, combined with his wide variety of public and private sources, a variety that other Victorian historians have lacked, enabled him to determine what actual sexual knowledge the Victorians possessed and how they acquired it. He explained their acquisition of sexual knowledge through his concepts of factitious innocence, learned ignorance and platonic libertinism.

According to Gay, Victorian men and women were not sexually innocent in the sense that they believed themselves to be innocent. It was a factitious, but not fictitious, innocence (279). Although they were not sexually innocent, they were not hypocrites because of their reluctance to acknowledge it. Factitious innocence in middle class women led to a 'learned ignorance'. Victorian women unconsciously remembered their initial sexual knowledge, first gained in infancy, during marriage and were able to overcome their ignorance (280). However, because of societal expectations, men wanted to believe that women were "ignorant of vice" or of anything sensual because of their education through the superego: society stated that women did not have sensual knowledge (280). Because of these public requirements, women and men were forced to maintain the facade of learned ignorance, but it was not so, as Karen Lystra also supported, in the private sphere.

Victorians, especially women, acquired sexual

knowledge through 'platonic libertinism', obtaining sexual knowledge by looking and hearing, but not touching, which explained much of their misinformation (334). Specifically, Victorians obtained knowledge by listening to servants, through the observation of the birthing process, from public statues of nudity, and by public displays of breast feeding (331, 332, 337). Gay used other sources, such as cookbooks and personal journals to dispel the myth of prudery. Mrs. Beeton's *The Book of Household Management* assumed that the housewife was familiar with procedures for cutting off the heads of turtles for soup and examining the breasts of possible wet nurses. Gay remarked with humor that "there isn't a whiff of smelling salts over these pages" (346). Gay also dispelled the myth that bourgeois men were too restricted by propriety to be useful. When forced to become involved with the pregnancies of their wives, "the consequences of intercourse found bourgeois men involved and informed" (354). Although William Gladstone actively participated in the pregnancy of his wife, by rubbing her breasts nightly to increase the circulation of milk, he could not bring himself to write the word 'breast' in his journal (352). This suggested that he was an involved and active husband, but also that euphemisms were deeply imbedded within him. By Gay's standards, William Gladstone was not a hypocrite because Gladstone's reluctance to write about sex did not inhibit his actions to act responsibly. Through this and other examples, Gay emphasized the extent which the superego was embedded within the Victorian psyche.

According to Charles Reade (cited within Gay's book), the "prurient prude," or self-moralizer, was the real Victorian hypocrite (378). Gay asserted that the works of these purists, such as Anthony Comstock, were not representative of Victorian culture, but a reflection of what these reformers wanted society to be (379). The separation of spheres of what Froude called the "utter divorce between practice and profession" was not a strictly Victorian behavior, but has existed and continued to exist in every major civilization (Gay 406). By presenting alternative explanations and viewpoints of the Victorians, through Freud and through Victorian voices, it became more and more difficult to simply condemn the Victorian as a prude and a hypocrite.

Even more so than Peter Gay, Karen Lystra, in her book *Searching the Heart*, examined the private

sphere of the Victorian, strictly through love letters. During the Victorian era, without the modern means of contacting one another, letters were the primary means lovers had of communicating with one another, but they were much more. As Karen Lystra revealed, they were ways in which to reveal the true self. Verbal skill in love letters indicated control over the self, which was an important Victorian virtue (18). During the "nineteenth century, love was a process of self-realization and identification through intense sharing," which was similar to Gay's idea of the acquisition of knowledge; love letters were another means of self-discovery (29). Love letters promoted the development of self in the private sphere; writing letters "was a powerful factor in formulating an identity distinct from social roles in young adulthood" (31). According to Lystra, revealing the true self was the ultimate ideal and measure of Romantic Love (32). The greatest emphasis on writing letters was to be natural, or sincere because "to be natural is the great success in love making" (16-17). The only realm that allowed for the expression of the 'true self' was the private sphere, which appeared superficially hypocritical. Yet the very existence of a 'true self' disputes the idea of Victorian prudery/hypocrisy. To the Victorians, intimacy and love were extremely important, but were only acceptable within the domain of the private sphere. The public realm was too uncertain for the Victorians to reveal their true selves. Because of the value of privacy, relationships in the private realm became sacred and were valued more.

In the twentieth century, Americans merge the public and private spheres, and the idea of 'separate spheres' contradicts our supposedly superior openness. What Peter Gay refers to as 'the passion for privacy,' according to Lystra, made Victorian love sacred (17). Through her research, Lystra noticed that Victorians derived "considerable pleasure" by speaking of sex in private, which did not indicate prudery, or any unwillingness to speak of sex (59). For instance, Lincoln Clark, a member of the Victorian bourgeois, challenged Acton's theory that women have no sexual pleasure when he wrote "I have the vanity to believe that the pleasure would not all be on one side" (61). Dorothea Lummis, another member of the Victorian bourgeois, wrote her husband after a separation that "I hope your heart and your lips and all of your sweet body will be warm and welcome with desire. . .", which further disputes Acton's claim

that women had no sexual feeling (74). Another unusual letter from prominent bourgeois minister, Robert Burdette, fantasized about his next meeting with his "Little Girl,"/lover, Clara (95). He described to Clara a fantasy with his "Little Girl" resting in his arms with "one free hand. . . that wants to play hide-and seek with two soft, snowy play fellows now and again. 'And you have a hand?' Well. . . it has its own hiding places" (95). Although WWI and WWII historians would find this letter hypocritical, due to Burdette's position as a minister and well-respected member of his community, it illustrated that Victorians, indeed took great pleasure in discussing sexual acts. Robert and Clara enjoyed sexually fantasizing in their letters in the private sphere, yet they knew that their letters were completely inappropriate in the public realm, perhaps enhancing their pleasure in the private realm.

Gay and Lystra dispelled Victorian stereotypes of prudery and hypocrisy by re-defining them through an examination of the public and private sources. Unlike previous historians of the WWI and WWII generations, Gay and Lystra questioned and examined sources such as Marryat and Acton in order to gain a realistic understanding of Victorian ideologies. They also utilized personal journals to gain a perspective directly from the bourgeois, which revealed that Victorians possessed sexual knowledge as well as

sincerity. These sources revealed the complexity of Victorian society, and the need for structure and self-revelation in a changing society.

When examined in their own private settings, the Victorians were not prudes. They fortified themselves within their separate spheres in order to maintain their identities. It is impossible to generalize nearly a century of people, spanning all classes and two countries, as prudish. Before labeling or generalizing a society, one must examine sources that call them prudish and determine why: the time period and the use of accounts from the public, rather than the private sphere. It was easier for many historians to promote the image of Victorian prudery than to reinterpret and explain it as did Peter Gay and Karen Lystra. Before our society looks at another, one should think about how our own society will be reviewed, using what methods and what sources. The most vocal or prolific members of any society are not necessarily the most representative. While our contemporary society discourages labeling individuals, it seems an impossibility that we should attempt to label a whole society and reduce it to a single word. The Victorians were not simply prudish, but were a part of a complex social structure and rich culture. By labeling them and reducing them to a negative connotation of an outdated word, prude, our society misses all that they represent and offer to the future.

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