

**'CLOSE YOUR EYES AND THINK OF ENGLAND'
ETHICS OR PRUDERY: MORAL QUESTIONS
IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND**

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*British History is two thousand years old,
and yet in good many ways the world has
moved farther ahead since the Queen was
born than it moved in all the rest of the
the two thousand put together.”¹*

Victorian Era is agreed to stretch through the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901). It was a tremendously exciting period when several literary, social and political as well as religious movements. It was the time of prosperity and major reforms. The spread of railways stimulated communication, broadened the world for the lower classes also. On the other hand it was the period of contradictions. The reason why it is so difficult to talk about the Victorian Era is because of its complexity. Extreme social changes, political and economical complexity make this period really interesting and challenging to discover. Hundreds of historians argue about whether it was a golden age with large happy families, the way it was described in Dickens's Christmas Carol or rather reality was *Twist Oliver*: cunning and exploiting. Or maybe it was as idyllic as country life in Jane Austin's novels where the most crucial problem for upper and upper-middle class young ladies was to find the perfect husband and the same young ladies treated each other in a rather hypocritical way. Victorian Era is full of contradictions: the comfortable life of the upper classes versus the exploited, miserable working class who lived in workhouses and where children were used to clean chimneys and women were employed in factories. Merry life in stately homes of the countryside and the poverty stricken life of torn apart working class families in slums.

While the Queen emphasised the importance of family, laws shut an eyes to prostitution. Sexual relationship reveals contradictions between public morality and private behaviour as well as of double standards favouring men against women. Female chastity and fidelity constituted acclaimed public truth while male indulgence and unfaithfulness were private realities. Justification of prostitution provided by medical experts who provided scientific arguments to prove that whereas men had strong sexual drives 'normal women' did not.² '*Just close your eyes and think of England*' a piece of advice mother gave to their daughters in Victorian England.

¹ Mark Twain: *The Innocents Abroad*.

² Hoppen, Theodore.K.*The Mid-Victorian Generation*1846-1886. OUP:2000. pp322.

Victorian morality was a set of values, which referred to the low toleration of crime, repression and prudishness. The roots of Victorian *Morale* go back to the Puritan movement in the 17th century. The Queen and her husband, Prince Albert's attitude towards more liberal morality was influenced by what they had seen (e.g. the parents of Prince Albert was divorced after public scandal, or King William, predecessor of Queen Victoria, lived with an actress and had 10 illegitimate children) therefore they set their own moral code rather high.

When Victoria claimed the throne there were more social problems to solve than ever before. Industrialisation resulted that more and more people started working in factories, child and women labour became a serious problem. The new moral standard set by the Queen was part of trying to find solution to the severe social problems. But what exactly does this morality involve? Morality, strict etiquette came hand in hand. It may remind us of the '*code of chivalry*' as both ideological systems required helping the less fortunate (at least hypothetically) and proper behaviour. Proper etiquette – set of rules and expectations from birth to death- required the use of flower language when speaking about sexuality. It was said to be profane to say certain words out loud or in public. Some example of flower language which we can take as coded message between young men and women: *Apple blossom*: preference, *Basil* – hatred, *calla lily* – feminine beauty, *Pansy* – you occupy my thoughts etc.³ However Victorian ethics also included prudery and the respect of patriarchal family.

Sexual repression was one of the main question of the age. While the word '*leg*' was substituted with the more neutral '*limb*', erotica wasn't forbidden as it lived in private letters or even in magazines. The most wordy example of this is the magazine called '*The Pearl*'. It was a monthly journal published by the Oxford University Press from 1879. It was issued for 18 month with a Christmas supplement. Even by today's standard it was a pornographic magazine, where erotic tales and drawings were published strongly devoted to sexuality and high society. When it was closed down by the authorities mostly because using obscene language shortly it was followed by '*The Oyster*' and '*The Boudoir*' with similar content. There is no record of whether the Queen read any of these magazines but we do know that she herself painted and collected small erotic pictures and once she even gave one for her husband as a present.

Another major question of the era was *homosexuality*. It was considered as gross, unacceptable and illegal but as most of high society young men studied in boarding schools with no girls around therefore their first experiences of that kind were with boys alike. Oscar Wilde for example was arrested for his sexual orientation. Was it merely prudery? I feel that homosexuality meant the lack of power and masculinity – in a society where women were the property of their father or husbands – accepting it would threaten the strict family value and the structure which meant to be fundamentally British. Homosexuality was not alone the violation of Victorian society: *prostitution* was also. Although it was accepted, what is more it was part of the Victorian society. Though it became a major problem in the 1850s. In *Prostitution*

³ Kirkby, Mandy, *The Victorian Flower Dictionary* Macmillan:2011

*in its moral, Social and Sanitary aspects*⁴ William Acton estimated the number of prostitutes around 80,000 (!). The institution of prostitutes was a society friendly answer to the prudery of the era. Still it became a major problem as several prostitutes were killed by a serial killer known as *Jack the Ripper*. His identity has not yet been revealed, what is known for sure is that he had brutally killed at least five prostitutes.

Victorian families were strict and patriarchal, and created the ‘fundamentum’ of Victorian morality. Most families had at least 5 or more children (the Queen and Prince Albert had 9 children). Family values included strict upbringing, courtesy, respect – children had to address their father as ‘Sir’- social differences and religious conformity, knowing the difference between good or bad. Disciplining and punishment were serious matters: ‘*Spare the rod and spoil the child*’ as a popular saying of the time suggested. But did Victorian parents really take responsibility for their children? The children of high society families spent most of their time with their nannies in their nursery. Tutors were employed to teach these children and boys at a relatively young age were sent to boarding schools, usually to follow the family traditions. So who really brought up these children?! How responsible were those Victorian parents?! Another contradiction of the period: why these strict family values did not concern middle and lower class families: alcoholism, broken families or child neglect were common in poor families.

As a consequence of the patriarchal Victorian family model, where the husband was the head of the family as well as the household, women were not equal to men, they were not allowed to go to school. Their main purpose of their life was to get married and to support their husband. Although Queen Victoria was one of the most powerful women of the world, she did not support any movements which aimed to gain rights for women. She detested the suffragettes. The only act she supported in this matter was the ‘*Married Women Property Act*’⁵, which meant that women did not lose their right to their own property when they got married. In other words they could divorce without fear of poverty, although divorce was very rare even in the late 19th century. If women cheated on their husband the society condemned them but if their husband did the same the same society closed an eye. The goal of the suffragettes was to gain rights for women as well as to make women equal with men.⁶ Some of them suggested peaceful movement as they believed that violence would only prove that they couldn’t be trusted. However the movement turned wild, they vandalised, burnt down churches – as the Anglican Church was against their aims. They did not gain any rights for women before the 1920s still they became emblematic figures of the late Victorian age.

Morality, prudery, hypocrisy, are all key words when we want to describe the Victorian society. Was it really a golden age of prosperity, a period which respected moral values, set up standards to follow, or was it the beginning of the end, a society which was glamorous on the surface but rotting beneath. The duality of the period inspired several authors, writers. Robert Louis Stevenson for example in his novel ‘*The Strange case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*’ not just explored the dichotomy of good and evil but also held a mirror to the Victorian society criticising its duality, morality

⁴ Acton, William: *Prostitution Considered in its Moral, Social, and Sanitary*, London: 1870. p3

⁵ The act was passed in 1882

⁶ Chevalier, Tracy, *Falling Angel*, Penguin Group, London 2001

and hypocrisy. Pessimism, decline can also be used to refer to the end of the Victorian age, and it also meant the end of Britain's superiority over the Western culture. Whether the duality of the Victorian age was the forerunner of the decline of British society in the twenties century?

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