

# The Perception of Romantic Relationships and Marriages in the Victorian Period

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Šteković, Tea

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*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, Filozofski fakultet**

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Sveučilište J.J. Strossmayera u Osijeku

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Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnost i  
pedagogije

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**Pogled na romantične veze i brakove u Viktorijanskom  
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Mentor: doc.dr.sc. Jadranka Zlomislić

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Bachelor's Thesis

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 0122233672

Ime i prezime studenta, JMBAG

## **Abstract**

This paper deals with the perception of romantic relationships and marriages in the Victorian period, which unlike previous periods, emphasizes the idea of romantic and ideal love within a marriage, not just the economic and social exchange that should benefit each party. The study examines the marriage between Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, the new popular romance novels, and the laws passed in the second half of the nineteenth century as decisive factors that shaped public opinion during the Victorian era. The three mentioned factors also contributed to the struggle for women's rights which would culminate during the First World War when women worked actively to support the war effort. This led to changes in the social and political landscape and increased women's self-awareness of their disadvantageous position and the need to fight for rights, equality and autonomy.

**Keywords:** Victorian era, romantic relationships, marriage, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, Victorian novels, Victorian marriage laws

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## **Introduction**

The institution of marriage has gone through many changes during history, depending on many factors such as the predominant religion at a certain period, the economic state of a country, what was popular when it came to things like novels and even influential people like nobles, kings, and queens. Stone states that prior to the Victorian era marriage had not many defined rules and there were not clear pointers to how a good quality marriage should look like (qtd. in McDonnell 4).

The Victorian era is defined in British history as the period between 1820 and 1914, which roughly corresponds with Queen Victoria's reign from the year 1837 to 1901 (Steinbach). This era is particularly important to the progression of women's rights not only in England, but also across Europe. Plenty of changes were brought upon in the public sphere of life, many of them starting exactly from the new regard and respect toward marriage. It was considered mostly as a business arrangement between two families that would both profit from the marriage because of the property exchange, which was at the end of the day, the goal of getting into a marriage to begin with. Another component of why marriages were defined so loosely is because not many people had enough money to have a proper church ceremony to get wed, so a lot of people would be married solely through an oral contract which had to be concluded by consummation of the new marriage. Only in 1753 had the government established some stricter laws which defined that a marriage produced within a church through the needed ceremonies was considered a real legally binding marriage (McDonnell 6). The reason there was a need for these laws was due to the more influential well-off families' growing concern about young people eloping and running away with the "loves of their life" who were much less financially stable, therefore ruining their inheritance, reputation, and family line.

This study explores the marriage between Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, the new popular romance novels, and the laws defining different factors of marriage which were made during the latter half of the nineteenth century to show the impact of each in shaping the public's views of romantic relationships and marriage. The paper is divided into chapters of which the first discusses the mentioned influences that directly impacted the institution of marriage in the Victorian era, namely, the marriage of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, the Victorian popular romance literature that impacted the public's opinion, and the laws that started to define marriage more precisely throughout the nineteenth century. The second chapter examines the

process of how courtships and proposals were handled while the third chapter takes a closer look at how married life worked in the Victorian period.

# **1. Shaping the Public Perception of Romantic Relationships and Marriages**

As previously stated, there are many things that impact what the public's views on what a marriage should look like. During the nineteenth century many things started to change that then snowballed into this new visualisation of an ideal marriage. The aim of this paper is to focus on the following as the main factors that had the most influence in shaping the public's perception of romantic relationships and marriages during the Victorian era:

1. the marriage between Queen Victoria and Prince Albert,
2. the new popular romance novels,
3. the laws defining different factors of marriage which were passed in the second half of the nineteenth century.

What is important to mention is what all these influences have in common is that they contributed to a huge shift in the public opinion at the time. According to Coontz, while women fought for more equality and autonomy, marriage became the apex of romance and an institution of love and romantic desire: "The Victorians were the first people in history to try to make marriage the pivotal experience in people's lives and married love the principal focus of their emotions, obligations, and satisfactions. Victorian marriage harbored all the hopes for romantic love, intimacy, personal fulfillment, and mutual happiness (. . . )" (qtd. in Flood 2).

## **1.1. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert's Marriage**

The marriage between Queen Victoria and Prince Albert was so iconic during the Victorian era that it became the epitome of what a proper marriage should look like, as author Jennifer Phegley puts it – they were a model for the general public to admire and aspire to be like (12). When they were both twenty years old, Victoria and Albert got married on the 10<sup>th</sup> of February 1840, only three years after she was officially crowned (Veldman and Williams). Many controversies surrounded the couple at the beginning of their relationship, from Prince Albert's German heritage which presented a problem at the English court and in the public's eye: "The English had tolerated, uneasily, their fill of German occupants at Windsor Castle (. . . )" (qtd. in Weintraub 14) to the fact that the Queen was considered to have a bad temper and always wanted the dominance in the relationship, which was not common for women at the time. This

all contributed to their rocky start in the eyes of both the public and the court. Nevertheless, all the obstacles only attributed to the legend of their romantic story in which love beats everything and always wins in the end. People looked at their story like a fairy tale. Author Margaret Homans explains how the Queen was known for writing a lot of her thoughts in her diaries which she kept from the age of thirteen (248) and several days after the wedding she famously wrote: “MY DEAREST DEAREST DEAR Albert sat on a footstool by my side, and his excessive love and affection gave me feelings of heavenly love and happiness I never could have hoped to have felt before! He clasped me in his arms, and we kissed each other again and again” (qtd. in Phegley 3).

The thing that made them stand out as a couple was the dynamic that represented the opposite of what was expected from the male and female gender. Queen Victoria in many ways stood out as the leader in their relationship, which was partially due to the power imbalance in their positions from the day since they met. This never presented a problem to them personally and Prince Albert always stood by the Queen as her greatest adviser and supporter. The Queen even referred to Albert as her “Angel” which came from the term “Angel in the House” typically used for women who were thought to be great housewives and basically someone who did a good job supporting her husband from the inside of their home (qtd. in Phegley 4). The Prince was also known as someone who did a great job being the Queen’s financial adviser and constantly saved large amounts of money. The reality of their marriage was not shown to the public as what it was because the Queen wanted to keep the image of the perfect marriage with a submissive wife and domestic husband. She never practised this though and never was the one to submit to other people’s wishes of what a woman or a wife should be. Even the idea of wanting to be pregnant and wanting to take care of children was something she hated.

Despite her personal beliefs she always wanted to promote traditional domestic values to the public: “The popular image of Victorian domesticity is almost entirely focused on women and children, suggesting that their needs were its governing rationale. . . . Perhaps the most powerful symbol of all was the blameless and bourgeois home of the Queen herself, in stark contrast to the irregular lives of her predecessors” (qtd. in McDonnell 9). Despite all these contradictions, what was most important to learn from their marriage, from both the fabricated version shown to the public and the real side of things, is that they appreciated a marriage in which two people were equals. They both respected each other immensely and no matter who the “leader” was, they always worked together to accomplish their goals and to lead the country in the way they thought was best. Compromise, communication, working together, connecting with each other,

and respecting each other – that is what was most admirable in their relationship. The couple brought back the British monarchy’s appeal to the public after many years of scandals and bad reputation caused by, as Wagner put it, “the irresponsibly rakish behavior of Victoria’s paternal uncles, who had refused to marry, had fought with their wives when they did marry, and had fathered many illegitimate children, but almost none in wedlock” (qtd. in McDonnell 9).

One of the reasons their marriage was so influential was also due to the fact she was such a celebrated and loved monarch. She presented herself as exactly what she knew the public would want her to be – “She could manipulate her image, to the extent that her culture made it possible for her to do so; yet many of her representations were made by others. Her resemblance to a bourgeois wife, mother, and later widow was a fiction created both by impressive tricks of deliberate representation and by a certain inevitability in Victorian culture” (Homans xxi). When Longford discussed the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897, she states that the whole of London came together that day to honour its longest reigning monarch. The ceremony itself was grand and excessive with never-ending marches of troops and brilliant colours as recounted by Virginia Woolf herself who was fifteen years old at the time. The Queen thought of this event as another display of the special and indescribable bond she had with the people of England, as she wrote in her diary that while “. . . passing through those six miles of streets. . . The crowds were quite indescribable, and their enthusiasm truly marvellous and deeply touching” (qtd. in Longford 1).

After the death of Prince Albert in 1861, the whole country knew the Queen was in great grief and she became known to the people as “The Widow at Windsor” while avoiding public appearances as much as she could (qtd. in Rappaport 15). Ever since that year until her own death, the Queen wore a black dress which became known as her “mourning dress” with which she set a new standard for the practice of mourning a loved one for such a long period of time – it can be concluded that the practice of royal mourning itself has culminated during her reign (qtd. in Bedikian 3).

## **1.2. Popular Literature during the Victorian Era**

Literature, even though it is most of the time fictional, represents a mirror image of what the period it was written in was like. Despite the huge shift in culture linked to marriage, many women still had to get married to certain people due to financial reasons. This reason even more

perpetuated the romantic ideals given in romance books of the time which always included our Victorian heroine who encountered perfect love that usually ended with a climactic proposal scene of which every woman dreamt. These books spread the idea of ideal love relations which were never connected to money or status – only to true romantic desire and love. Victorian women did not have many choices when it came to their own lives and destinies, mostly everything was decided for them, and all that was expected from them was to then be subservient and submissive:

Middle class women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not encouraged to think of themselves as members of the nation of individuals. Social decorum taught women to practice self-denial instead of cultivating self-assertion, and to think themselves collectively, in terms of universal of the sex, instead of contemplating individual autonomy, talents, and capacities or right. (qtd. in McDonnell 2).

It felt like the only choice they had was at the moment of the proposal itself, but even then, sometimes they had no choice. The Victorian romance novels gave them an escape to this ideal world where the woman has a choice in everything she does: she chooses a man she wants; she chooses who to marry, who to reject – she is her own person with nobody to dominate over her or push her around. Flood states that due to these very reasons, marriages, proposals, and engagements are central features in Victorian literature. Marriage is viewed as the highest personal romantic achievement, and it is therefore frequently the basis of the main plot in the novels themselves. The protagonist usually goes through a journey which ends with a happy ending and with her or her love interest growing in some way as a person.

Flood provides some examples of the typical Victorian era plots that will be represented in the remainder of this chapter through a few examples of popular novels at the time. One of the most well-known examples of Victorian romance novels is Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, which was published in 1847, is a great example of a proposal-driven plot. The protagonist is a very vocally opinionated and strong woman who faces proposals from two different men. She vocalises how she wants to be treated as a woman and sets up a standard for herself as a future wife. In the proposals the men showcase their values and what they deem as important for a marriage, based on which Jane Eyre makes her decision whether to turn them down or not. Flood explains that the novel emphasises the importance of compatibility between two romantic partners because Jane doesn't accept the proposals until the version of a marriage suitable for both of them is arranged (7). She seeks for a greater purpose as well as passion which she does not want to give up just to get into a marriage which would make her ultimately unhappy. She stands her ground

and presents a good role model for younger women to never give up on their values, wants, and dreams just to get into a marriage. She presents a strong woman who is independent and not afraid to speak her mind in the world controlled by men.

Another popular novel that Flood presents as an example is *North and South* by Elizabeth Gaskell published in 1855 (7). The centre of the plot focuses on the feelings of anxiety experienced by the main character Margaret Hale about being a woman in Victorian society. She realises that when a woman is married it is something that everybody around her views almost as their concern – her marriage status is always on the mind of those around her. She sees how contradictory society's views of the woman's role are because as a wife she is constantly in the public eye for what she does and always needs protection and coverage from the man. Flood explains how hard it is for Margaret to accept the latter part especially, but at the end of the novel she grows into a person who accepts her own vulnerability and manages to emotionally connect with a man who becomes her husband (8).

The final novel that will be mentioned in this chapter is Thomas Hardy's novel *Far from the Madding Crowd* published in 1874. Flood states how the plot itself is quite progressive and even a bit controversial for the Victorian era but the novel still did quite well (8). The protagonist Bathsheba Everdene is a flirtatious but independent young woman. Even though she enjoys male company, she is not ready to settle down and get married so as soon as a man mentions anything close to it, she is no longer interested. Her character goes through a lot of hardship throughout the novel including a terrible marriage, but still manages to have a happy ending when one of her original suitors comes back to propose to her once again – and she is finally ready for it. Once again, the heroine has changed through the novel to a new person by accepting some of the society's conditions while also keeping some of her characteristics that make her who she is. At the end Flood states that she ends up in a happy marriage and becomes a quieter and more submissive person while having a husband who loves her for who she truly is, even after everything that has happened to her (9). Even though this is one of the more progressive female characters of the period, it can still be seen that it is expected from a woman to change quite a lot to fit the role of a perfect wife.

As previously stated, literature really does reflect reality, and the same can be seen when comparing these novels which depict the lives of strong women and the life of Queen Victoria and how she had to change and adapt her image to gain the favour of the public. Women did gain many rights during this period but there was still a long way to go and until then they had to change and adapt to what those around them wanted. A huge step was of course protecting

the sanctity of marriage and the idea of true love, as seen in these popular novels. However, they also do show the reality of being a Victorian woman in the way that marriage was just something inevitable and the only solution to a woman's happily ever after. Each woman gets her happy ending after many hardships, but it is always found within a commitment to a man. There was ultimately no other choice for a woman then to settle down eventually and become a perfect housewife. Phegley proves this through statistics by stating that in 1871 "nearly 90 percent of women between the ages of 45 and 49 were or had been married" (qtd. in Flood 59).

### **1.3. New Laws Regulating the Institution of Marriage**

Phegley provides the full timeline of all the laws concerning the institution of marriage in England which helped shape the idea of what a marriage should be and ultimately changed what marriage was in years prior (17). It became more and more legally binding which helped define this institution as something more than just an oral agreement which it had been until 1753 when the law was made that considered a marriage valid only when it was produced from church ceremonies appropriate for the cause (McDonnell 6). Further on in this chapter, only the most relevant laws are mentioned according to the importance of their impact.

One of the first laws Phegley mentions is the Custody of Infants Act of 1839 which was the first law that allowed mothers to ask for custody of their own children under the age of seven when divorce ensued (17). The only reason not to allow the mother custody was in the case that she had committed adultery and that was the reason the marriage fell apart and even in the case that the custody was not granted, the mother had the right to request periodic access to her children. This was quite exceptional since for the first time in English law-making history, mothers were gaining more and more rights even after divorce. This law was later updated in 1873 as the Infant Custody Act which granted women access to child custody even if they had been the one to commit adultery. Phegley concludes with the law of 1886 – finally the Guardianship of Infants Act was passed that gave equal rights to custody to both parents – it considered the welfare of the child first which made a huge change in all custody battles since then up until today (18).

Phegley states the reasons for a divorce were also updated throughout the Victorian years through different laws and acts (17). In 1837 the Matrimonial Causes Act (also known as the Divorce Act) permitted divorce in the case the husband had been guilty of adultery compounded



by desertion for over two years, compounded with brutality, or if the act was committed with a man, a relative, or with an animal. In contrast to all those conditions that were needed for a woman to get a divorce – a man could be granted a divorce due to the reason of adultery alone. In 1878 the Amendment to the Matrimonial Causes Act was made which allowed women a divorce based on the reason of assault. In 1886 this act was expanded with the Maintenance in Case of Desertion Act which named more reasons which permitted a divorce, including desertion, neglect, and persistent cruelty.

The author also briefly mentions the laws concerning the woman's property within marriage that severely changed during this period as well. The Married Women's Property Act of 1870 allowed women to have the right to their own earnings in the amount of under 200 pounds after getting a divorce. In 1882 the Married Women's Property Act was updated giving women all rights to their earnings and inheritances before or after marriage (18).

Even though all these changes could seem small, especially in comparison to the rights women have today, each of them has contributed to keeping this fight for equality alive and as Flood states in her work: "Though in retrospect this progress seems minimal, the changes in law meant that discussions and debates about marriage and what it meant for women were constantly in the public's mind" (qtd. in Flood 3). Throughout this progression, a clear difference in the treatment of women versus the treatment of men is shown. Fortunately, the Victorian era was a good period for the progression of women's rights especially regarding marriage. What this chronology of laws goes to show is how many changes really happened within such a short period and the degree to which women started to be treated more equally during Queen Victoria's reign motivated by her powerful position as a woman. Marriages became more defined and regulated by the law so neither side could come out of it with injustice, inequality, or with being cheated so to say. The laws worked to shape marriage as something within which a person should enter with only one purpose and that is to love and respect the other person – not to profit from them financially or in any other way.

## 2. Courtship and Proposals

John Maynard states in his book *Matrimony: Or, What Marriage Life Is, and How to Make the Best of It* that: “Rather refuse the offers of a hundred men, than marry one you do not, cannot love” (qtd. in Phegley 2). Women were usually presented with several suitors to choose from, but in many cases, the romantic belief of Maynard did not reflect the reality. Becoming engaged was the pinnacle of a young woman’s femininity and decision making and, in her choice, there were many things to consider, from financial components to compatibility and love to what her family needs or wants from her. Flood states that proposals are when a woman’s “beliefs and anxieties about love, marriage, and womanhood reach a culmination, and in providing her with the opportunity to answer such an important question, they also allow her to vocalize those feelings and ideas” (qtd in Flood 2). Phegley also states that: “Courtship was a time for couples to assess each other’s characters before making life-long commitments. Though men were the aggressors, women ruled courtship rituals” (qtd. in Frost 732). Yeazell states that young Victorians were largely encouraged to get to know one another before marriage or any kind of proposal as an indispensable part of courtship so that the choice when a proposal does come is based at least to some degree on mutual compatibility, respect, and love for one another (209). With this concept also came the unspoken fear of premarital relations, which was too much of a taboo topic to be discussed openly, especially with young women. Phegley also states that there was a constant struggle between the ideal of love which enchanted the Victorians so much and the reality of the society they lived in which was very much grounded in societal statuses and financial statements (2).

Flood explains how the process of courtship very much depended on where you stood within the societal hierarchy and how well-off your family was (2). Yeazell then talks about how when it comes to working class (factory workers and other manual labourers), they had the most freedom in the process, unlike anyone from higher classes (209). They did not participate in different kinds of courtship rituals like balls or dances since they lacked the money to do so, but this caused them to meet in many different ways unsupervised and uncontrolled by other parties, like their parents for example. It has also been proven that due to this fact the lower classes had more access to mixed company than the middle class and upper class. They also had little to no worry about the approval of their parents, so the choice of a partner truly was only up to them. Yeazell then also states that the negative side of lower-class courtship though was hidden in the very fact that everything was so unsupervised that anything could happen

which led to high numbers of premarital pregnancies and breach of promise suits taken by women who agreed to certain acts under the impression that their partner would marry them, but then failed to do so. Frost states that suits of this kind no longer exist in modern law but were very common within the Victorian lower class (20).

Frost states that what was new in this period were the modern ways in which the Victorian middle class advertised themselves as potential wives or husbands (732). She states that the new booming business of matrimonial newspapers was full of young people hoping to find their significant others (733). Although this practice was most closely linked to the middle class, the advertisements always included the man's income or the woman's salary, which abundantly shows how important money was, especially for the middle class, when getting into any kind of commitment. Phegley also states how this practise would have been very useful for women, since outside of this there was no other way for them to initiate courtship by themselves (188). It was exactly that honesty and forwardness of women about what they want through these advertisements that pushed a lot of judgement and social stigma their way. This way of meeting new people was not as common as the other ways of meeting in person, but it is worth mentioning due to its innovations, modernity, and the impact of it that can be seen to this day.

Frost explains that it was most common during this period for people belonging to the middle and upper classes to meet through their parents or family members, neighbours, and mutual friends, as well as through social events linked to churches or work-related events (733). After meeting, the process of courtship was usually quite short and would not last over nine months. Even though people usually met at some sort of public events, they always sought out privacy with whomever they were courting. Frost concludes by saying this would be achieved through long walks or through men being invited over to the women's parental homes for tea or supper after which the parents would commonly allow the pair some privacy (734).

McDonnell states that for upper-class marriages, it was especially important who their offspring were marrying, or better said, which families they were marrying into since it would affect their family's heritage in years, decades, and even centuries to come (19). She goes on to explain the process where the mothers were usually the ones in the families who guided the process of introducing their daughters to potential suitors. They would ensure that the suitors were a good match for their daughters, but also made their daughters look as good and as desirable as possible (20). Sons were not paraded around like daughters were, so they would be the ones to offer themselves to women who were on the market with the support and advice from their families. However, even though they were in a way paraded around, women were in no way

helpless, since the whole process did depend on their final decision. The choice would often be whether they would marry someone for noble and practical reasons or for romantic reasons and love. This depended a lot on what their families would advise them based on what their family needed at the time: “Mothers tried to make matches that would be best for advancing the social standing and wealth of the family while also being what is in the best interest for their daughters, usually trying “to protect their daughters” from rakes, social climbers, or others who had less than noble intentions for their daughters” (qtd. in McDonnell 21).

After the proposal was accepted and the couple was engaged, the engagement itself would last for a quite longer time than the courting – usually several years explains Frost (733). The reason for this was that if the couple came from working-class families, they would need quite some time to collect money for the wedding and their future married life. Frost then states that despite this, it was very common for the engaged couple to send gifts to each other as little tokens of appreciation, but also to be able to show that they are taken when going out in public. For the second reason, engagement rings were given, while for the first reason, pictures were commonly taken to send to your partner or small locks of hair were cut off and then sent to them. Letters were also very frequently sent due to the separation of the couple until they could get married, so a large part of getting to know someone after such a quick period of courtship was done through these very letters.

McDonnell explains how it was up to women to think good and hard before accepting these proposals also because single women on average experienced much more freedom than married women (6). The women who were unmarried had greater control when it came to their property and inheritance, they could also receive a trust and handle all these things by themselves, as they wished. It was important who you were marrying, because even if it was not because of love, it still needed to be to someone who wouldn't ruin the woman's property and financial situation which she had before the marriage. Many families would try to ensure that the inheritance they received from them would be the woman's property only by demanding and emphasising that the private income is assured only to the woman's separate use. Wealthy families especially used this tactic, because of the fear men would marry their daughters for money and then ruin their reputation and financial situation. Unfortunately, not all families intervened in this way and many women did get taken advantage of and when they were left penniless, even if they wanted to escape the marriage, they couldn't, as historian Joan Perkins writes: “There was a vast difference between having even a small private income, and having none at all” (qtd. in McDonnell 18).

### 3. Married Life

The ideals of marriage were largely set up by Queen Victoria and the rest of the royal family themselves in the way they acted and carried themselves in public. From the beginning of their marriage Queen Victoria and Prince Albert set a whole new standard for couples everywhere starting from their wedding which was absolutely huge and lavish according to McDonnell (7). This caused many women across the nation to dream of a similar wedding ceremony – very public, glamorous, and not in any way simple or humble. Queen Victoria also broke quite a few traditions and rules with her wedding which then caused a shift into more modern traditions which we still have to this day, as Stephanie Coontz states: “When Queen Victoria broke with convention and walked down the aisle to musical accompaniment, wearing pure white instead of the traditional silver and white gown and colored cape, she created an overnight tradition (qtd. in McDonnell 8).

Another ideal of Victorian marriage largely focused on children and childbearing. Blissful domesticity was highly appreciated with as many children as the woman could have. The roles of a wife versus those of a husband varied quite a lot, but they did have some common characteristics which would be expected from each gender. McDonnell explains that the choice of a partner was always impacted by what the person sought out in a spouse – men would usually look for a companion who would provide them with emotional support from the home, who they could share their worries and dreams with, while women looked for someone who could provide them with security in their everyday life while also wanting to feel protected by the man (10).

Women carried the role of being the emotional support in the house, the keeper of moral integrity, and the role model for her children. They always had to keep calm and collected to appear well in front of the public, while also being responsible and taking care of everything that needed to be taken care of. Women had to be emotionally strong and good listeners to provide their husbands with stability in the home whenever they needed to vent or to receive advice, as Victorian author Sarah Stickney Ellis wrote:

To be permitted to dwell within the influence of such a man, must be a privilege of the highest order; to listen to his conversation, must be a perpetual feast; but to be permitted into his heart—to share his counsels, and to be the chosen companion of his joys and

sorrows!—it is difficult to say whether humility or gratitude should preponderate in the feelings of the woman thus distinguished and thus blest. (qtd. in McDonell 10)

As previously mentioned, the term Angel in the House became commonly used when referring to the ideal woman in the household. The term itself was produced by the poet Coventry Patmore in 1854 in the poem by the same name. The poem itself illustrates a perfect image of what was ideally expected of a Victorian married couple:

Man must be pleased; but him to please

Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf

Of his condoled necessities

She casts her best, she flings herself. (Patmore 75)

The religiousness of the name itself tells a lot about what was expected from women, which was purity in every way possible, moral superiority and ethics, and deep religious respect towards her family, her husband, and to God Himself. The sanctity of the family household and of marriages became so important due to all the fast and sudden changes happening through the Industrial Revolution. People started to be afraid of such a sudden change of lifestyle and so much new technology, so they turned to religion, morality, and purity in the aspects of life they could control – their home life. Women were called the Angels because Victorians believed that mothers were closest to God and because they were expected to hold all the aforementioned values, women were the most similar to angels in their qualities of comfort and selflessness. Patmore believes that the quality of selflessness was one of the most important ones for Angels since they were never supposed to complain or seem tired but were supposed to appreciate all the work they can do for their husband, children, and even people outside their home who needed help. They needed to be thankful for having so many opportunities to do work and overall, were expected to be very happy and cheerful persons.

Oneill states that one of the common problems Victorian women faced was the strict idea of what their sexuality was supposed to be like (10). Because of Christian values and morals that were prevalent at the time, women were expected to be pure, innocent, and even asexual people who never lusted or desired after sexual intercourse. They would only engage in the act with the intention of breeding more children within a marriage. In an advice book from 1875, Doctor William Acton wrote that the perfect woman was kind, self-sacrificing, sensible, and considerate while being completely and utterly ignorant when it came to sensual acts, while

also writing “I am ready to maintain that there are many females who never feel any sexual excitement whatever. Women have no interest in sex” (qtd. in McDonnell 24). Because of these nonsensical standards, young women would often write how the first wedding night would leave them traumatised and surprised because no one would warn them what was going to happen. Annie Besant, a writer and social activist in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries expressed her concern about this topic as she wrote: “. . . My darling mother meant all that was happiest for me when she shielded me from all knowledge of sorrow and sin. . . keeping me ignorant as a baby till I left home a wife” (qtd. in McDonnell 23). On the other hand, as Stearns states, men were talked to about this in a very positive way – the wedding night was something they anticipated and looked forward to a lot, so while women were left horrified and surprised after the first sexual experience, men most often found it amazing and fulfilling (627). Of course, this would vary from couple to couple, and one should not generalize, but the situation overall in most cases looked like this.

Another taboo topic in Victorian society was childbirth and pregnancy. McDonnell talks about how the topic was regarded as distasteful and inappropriate even though childbearing and having children was a prevalent and important value in Victorian society (26). Pooley also states that women were usually encouraged to work on having children right after getting married and to have as many children as possible, which is why Victorian families were usually quite big with an average of five or six children per family (22). Even though the process of giving birth was something many women did numerous times and the event would usually even be attended by friends and relatives, most women wanted to hide as much evidence of childbirth happening as possible: “Feeling that the subject was indelicate, many women, including the Queen, disposed of written notes about their confinements and much other information on the subject was never written down but communicated orally and hence lost” (qtd. in Wohl 24). The Queen herself was therefore one of the main reasons this became such a taboo topic, since she hated childbirth and never wanted to speak of it, despite being the idol for the nation for having nine children. McDonnell describes how she believed that pregnancy was a topic which presented a danger to women’s modesty and that it was foul to speak of it in public (23). While she hated to speak of it, that never stopped the press writing about her pregnancies and childbirth constantly. While her husband also never minded talking about these details and gladly discussed his wife’s pregnancies, it was the Queen who mostly impacted the public’s view on things.

Despite this sort of a marriage sounding like a huge upgrade from what was common in history beforehand, the downside of them is worth mentioning. Hammerton, in his article “Victorian Marriage and the Law of Matrimonial Cruelty” argues that even though this type of marriage, the so-called companionate marriage, is viewed throughout history as something which was revolutionary in a way and helped women’s position to change for the better, that it is only another form of patriarchy (269). Even though there is a clear divide between the roles of a husband versus a wife in a marriage, the role of women in society overall did begin to change for the better, Eileen Spring concludes: “(. . .) the catalyst of change, far from being old-fashioned love, was rather the accumulating set of demands for women’s greater freedom and equality” (qtd. in Hammerton 270). Hammerton’s argument that this kind of change in marriage is almost irrelevant to the overall position of women in society is proved in his essay through the state of Victorian courts and Victorian law overall, which he describes as fully conservative. Most laws during this time were as he states grounded on the traditional view that expected female submissiveness and male superiority and dominance. He bases his hypothesis on the many cases during the Victorian period which based divorce from a man on matrimonial cruelty – “Before and after 1857 it was one of the most crucial grounds for women, either as a single justification for judicial separation or, in combination with adultery, for divorce” (qtd. in Hammerton 272).

Hammerton continues by explaining what exactly defines matrimonial cruelty in court and that at the beginning of the nineteenth century the law referred to extreme violence while later the degree of violence that needed to justify a divorce had been reduced and referred to a clear risk to a woman’s life with the process overall resulting in suffering and pain (273). Even though this was a common ground for divorce during the period, it needed to be proved with indisputable evidence, which often presented a problem. All the cases where proof of injury to a limb or proof of danger presented to a woman’s life or health was not shown, were dismissed momentarily. By the end of the nineteenth century, luckily, the law changed quite a bit and threats of violence, any other kinds of verbal threats, or behaviour which is supposed to induce fear were also possible proof for court to allow a divorce.

Now, what exactly was the reason matrimonial cruelty was so common in Victorian marriages? Hammerton (1990) theorises that cruelty builds and piles on over many years with its basis on the husband’s expectations for him to be the ultimate patriarchal authority and then him going to extreme lengths to make it happen – basically forcing submissiveness and obedience upon his wife. The ideals of marriage presented back then, which still do bear influence today, the



role of a dominant man who needs to be in charge – he should never be questioned and is supposed to be the ultimate authority. Hammerton concludes that when this is put to the test by women, men commonly become frustrated, and violence appears (275). In that way, even though women did become more equal, and marriage did become more than an institution which was produced only to exchange money and power, there was still a long way to go.

Another downside to Victorian marriages was caused by lack of open conversation about intimacy within a marriage. Stephanie Coontz theorizes in her book *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage*, that the reinforced gender roles within a Victorian marriage drove the couple to separation when it came to emotional and physical connection and intimacy (167). She states that the spheres of what it meant to be a man and what it meant to be a woman were so rigidly separated, that it made it hard for couples to freely share their dreams, anxieties, and opinions no matter how much they loved each other. Even though Victorian values did promote intimacy as a good thing a couple should have, the reality of the situation was that so many constraints were put upon men and women as husbands and wives, that true intimacy was simply almost unattainable. Coontz states that couples would often state that they felt a “sense of estrangement,” with men starting that they are beginning to “chafe against the burdens of marriage” and with women feeling “weeping loneliness after yet another day alone in the house” (188). McDonnell states that because of this, women would often lose the dreams of a romantic marriage they dreamt of before becoming a wife and men would commonly start becoming more absent in their family home (20).

It cannot be stated that marriages in Victorian England were either good or bad, of course every marriage worked on its own, but what can be concluded is that this became a new era for matrimonial life, not only in concept, but also in reality. McDonnell talks about companion marriage as the ideal of what marriage should look like, with both parties being viewed as equals (22). Even though typical domestic roles still existed within the family and the household, women greatly progressed. While many women did find happiness within marriages, the ones that did not had it much easier than before because divorce became an option available to everybody who needed it, and divorce rates greatly increased during the Victorian era. Even though women who got divorces would often be scrutinized, it opened a path for the future when it would become a more accepted and normalised occurrence. As with many other things, despite Victorian women having a hard life within society, they created a new wave of change which would impact the future of women, not only in England but the rest of Europe too, and would lead the women’s rights movement in a more progressive way.

## Conclusion

The institution of marriage went through a lot of changes in the nineteenth century, especially in the Victorian period. The marriage between Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, the new popular romance novels, and the laws passed in the second half of the nineteenth century are three decisive factors that shaped public opinion concerning romantic relationships and marriages at this time. During the Victorian era, Queen Victoria and her husband Prince Albert were viewed as a couple who perfectly embodied the ideal domestic family, and they significantly impacted many spheres of life. Particularly they had an impact on the expectations concerning the largeness of the family. The second factor, the Victorian romance novels, shaped the culture by idealising the concept of perfect love between two compatible equals who always overcame all their obstacles to live happily ever after. Among the main writers that stand out the most here are Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë. Furthermore, the third factor, the laws and acts concerning marriage passed during this time, helped the development and defining of marriage as a proper institution between two parties that was based on romantic rather than economic reasons and provided equal rights for both parties.

In addition, the process of courtship was dependant largely on social class, with the lowest classes having the smallest number of restrictions and supervision. Middle and upper classes would usually meet through controlled environments and in public so the families could oversee the entire process. The opinions of the family regarding their offspring's spouse were quite important, but not crucial since the decision ultimately depended on the person getting married.

Even though marriages were supposed to be ideal, romantic, and full of both emotional and physical intimacy, the values presented by the Victorian society often presented a problem in fulfilling these expectations. Married women were overwhelmed by all the demands that was expected of them and found it difficult to be the perfect housewife in the public's eyes. Husbands often got violent if the situation at home was not as perfect as they wanted it to be or if they felt their wives weren't obedient enough, so separation cases caused by domestic violence rose during the period.

Even though there were many negative sides to being a woman during this time, the Victorian era was at the end of the day a period of huge improvement in the sphere of women's rights. In conclusion it is important to mention that the three mentioned factors contributed significantly to the struggle for women's rights which would culminate during the First World War when

women worked actively to support the war effort. This led to changes in the social and political landscape and increased women's self-awareness of their disadvantageous position and the need to fight for rights, equality and autonomy.

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