**HM5402 Victorian Values**

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**Robert Southey, Letters from England (1808)**

Within this extract, Southey describes the pollution, dirt, and din in the Victorian city of Birmingham and how this environment from industrialisation effects people’s health and the dehumanising effect of mass production in the 1800s. Tristram Hunt mentions the ‘rotten, rat-haunted buildings’[[1]](#footnote-1) of Edinburgh which may have developed due to ‘high density housing [which was deemed to be the cause of] fostering dirt, [and] disease’[[2]](#footnote-2), often ‘ill soughed, [and] ill ventilated’[[3]](#footnote-3). This description allows understanding of the impact these cities had on the health of the people of England and the need for workers on the rise due to this housing crisis, with cities not keeping up with the demand of this new economic and production boom. This need for workers created a system where the ‘machines throbbed and wirred ceaselessly’[[4]](#footnote-4), which ‘destroys the intensity and flow of a man’s animal spirits’[[5]](#footnote-5). This suggests that industrialisation both helped and hindered Victorian cities, as this increase in production created a drive to strengthen British economy and ‘make economic growth a priority’[[6]](#footnote-6).

Factories and workhouses damaged the population’s health with these products being purchased and produced “at the expense of health and morality” as workers became the “two-legged beast of labour”, highlighting the worker’s expendability and lack of specialised work within these factories. Working conditions caused the factory workers to smell of “train oil and emery” and have “red eyes…[caused by] the fires…and their hair turned green by the brass works.” With focus on the quantity of production, as a display of “human ingenuity [for] watch chains, necklaces, arid bracelets, buttons, buckles, and snuff boxes”, this reinforces the notion that economic prosperity is prioritised over the workers as there were “no returns if its killed and wounded”. Use of the pronoun “its” dehumanises and trivialises the lives of the workers, and their expendability in the eyes of society, higher classes, and the industrialists. This dehumanisation of the work force is a reoccurring motif in Victorian literature and satirical poetry, in retaliation to the unfair working and living conditions of the lower classes within these cities. Poets such as William Blake rebelled against the working conditions within factories with questions such as in Blake’s *The Tyger* ‘What the hammer? What the chain,[[7]](#footnote-7). Blake’s social commentary via his works reiterate the dehumanisation of the working classes in the 1800s and Southey’s *Letters from England* states that there is more “causes at present for humiliation than for triumph at Birmingham.”

Throughout the whole Victorian work force, men, women, and children’s safety was disregarded with the dangerous machinery killing and injuring many. Victorian workhouses caused around ‘145,000 deaths every year’, furthering the argument that these workers or inmates, were expendable as these machines had a low skill needed as factory staff and inmates were trained on these machines after their employment[[8]](#footnote-8). Southey’s *Letters from England* describes that these factories and workhouses working conditions and accidents mean that “commerce sends in no returns if its killed and wounded.” Increase in the population of Victorian cities between 1800 and 1841, such as London increasing from 958,863 to 1,948,417[[9]](#footnote-9). Population increase led to over-crowding of housing allowing diseases to spread rapidly and overcrowding within the workforce. This housing crisis created a sanitary problem throughout the cities of England, due to the lack of privies and ‘wastes from slaughter houses, chemical soap, gas, dye-houses, [and] old urine wash.’ These recent city residents increased demand for jobs which led to many factories being built which moved towards a hard-working, labour-focused city, creating smoke which effected the atmosphere and an increase in the air pollution of each city.

Description of the factories and workhouses effects on the environment in Birmingham are resembled in the account of ‘James Phillips Kay’ in Manchester where the ‘chimneys vomit forth dense clouds of smoke’[[10]](#footnote-10). These fumes were created by the means of production, “active and moving” within the city’s “whole atmosphere” and effecting every aspect of the city, leading to multiple health problems such as Tuberculosis and the outbreak of Cholera. In 1854, ‘a Dr Snow showed the relationship between a major cholera outbreak and a single polluted pump’[[11]](#footnote-11). Outbreak and increase of diseases led to ‘The Sanitary Act [in] 1847’ in which required cities to have ‘sewers and drains to be provided in all new residential areas’[[12]](#footnote-12). While Southey’s *Letters from England* in 1808 describes the dirt on the streets to be in “idle heaps” with streets acting as ‘common receptacles of mud, refuse, and disgusting ordure’[[13]](#footnote-13). This link between pollution and the declining health of workers and their families in the cities of the 1800s, is described in Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House,* as ‘the poison which causes death is not a gas, but a sort of atmosphere of organic particles…invisible.’, describing a 19th century belief and knowledge of how diseases spread and were created and disproved ideas, after Dr Snow’s discovery of Cholera at the Broad Street pump in London[[14]](#footnote-14). Dickens’ work about Victorian cities, such as *Bleak House* describes cities of poverty and pollution which have influenced people’s view on the Victorian era and its living conditions. This atmosphere reinforces Southey’s description of Victorian Birmingham’s pollution filling out everywhere and “penetrates everywhere spotting and staining everything” leading to the feeling of their “throat wanted sweeping” effecting factory workers and the people of Birmingham, with their ”sickly” complexions.

Southey’s *Letters from England* allows insight into the living and working conditions within Victorian cities,

with the focus on economic growth with the product of many commodities such as “buttons, buckles, and snuff boxes”. Whilst creating a large amount of air pollution, alongside the dirt and din in the streets of England’s cities which led to a lower quality of life and an increase in diseases among the working classes. Workers within these factories were dismissed as unimportant to the industrialists, with many dangerous or harmful techniques used within their work, leading to many health problems that often led to death and disease.

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**“Companion to Man”: To what extent does this description adequately capture the reality of women’s lives in Victorian Britain?’**

In the Victorian era, women were restricted financially by lack of independence from their father, husband, and their male kin, with lack of access to their wages if they did work. Women’s wages and property were owned by their father then their husband, if they married, suggesting that the description of women as “companion to man” is adequate in terms of the socio-economic structure of society. Victorian Britain ‘emphasises the ideals of female domesticity and male breadwinning,’ within all classes of people in the societal structure[[15]](#footnote-15). While lower class women in Victorian Britain were ‘expected to work to support themselves… [While] they were imagined to be physically weaker than men.’[[16]](#footnote-16) Femininity in the 1800s meant ‘dependence, subordinate status, domesticity, and sexual modesty,’ the emphasis on domesticity was especially prominent ‘until the 1860s [as] women were expected to marry and to avoid work.’[[17]](#footnote-17) This dependence on their male kin extended to dependence on their husband, with ‘married women… had very different legal rights from men and single women’ as they could not ‘legally own any property’ with laws concerning ‘marriage, property, and gender could also weigh heavily on men.’[[18]](#footnote-18) With these restrictive laws some feminists argue that women in Victorian Britain were ‘doubly disqualified from voting – once as a woman, and once as persons who did not own property.’[[19]](#footnote-19) This lack of suffrage created an obstacle for change as women weren’t allowed to have a voice, they were expected to be the submissive inferior to men. Historically and within Victorian Britain the description of “companion to man” is an adequate descriptor of the reality of women’s lives, due to women’s inability to challenge legally and socially, leading to the Suffragist and Suffragette Movements post-Victorian Britain in 1903 across Britain.

The Industrial Revolution’s impact on women’s work ‘was most dramatic for white-collar workers, not for factory operatives’, In 1816 women’s labour force was at ‘34.1%’ then declined in 1911 at ‘29.7%.’[[20]](#footnote-20) However, the percentage of female ‘teachers, shop assistants, clerks, and civil servants rose from ‘26.1%’ to ‘32.9%’ in the same time frame.[[21]](#footnote-21) Development of factories and machines is often argued to have ‘propelled women from their traditional place at home to a wage-earning position in the larger world.’[[22]](#footnote-22) This development allowed women to have the option to work, creating freedom especially for the women of the working class. This development allowed women to strengthen their family’s financial situation and gain independence socially and personally from their husband. Textiles and education industries were the main industries occupied by these women of the working and middle classes. The introduction of the New Poor Law in 1834 created an issue for women applying for poor relief as they had ‘to struggle with the contradiction of being both a woman and a worker.’[[23]](#footnote-23) This contradiction opposed gender roles and the separate gender spheres within Victorian Britain, as these women ‘supported their families with wage-paying jobs alongside their already heavy domestic burdens... [Which] contributed to their independence both privately and publicly.’[[24]](#footnote-24) With the combination of the New Poor Law in 1834 and the Industrial Revolution, women’s rights and independence increased allowing these women to gain self-identity separate from being a wife and mother, becoming a fully rounded person.

Oppression of women within the legal system extended into the household, with women facing restrictions both publicly and privately. Roles of women in the household varied based on class, but mostly focused on the domesticity expected from Victorian women. Upper-class women had their ‘wealth put into separate trusts administered by their fathers or brothers.’[[25]](#footnote-25) Which separates her wealth from her husband and creates independence and suggests that this description of a companion to man is not adequate in describing their lives, due to this financial independence from her husband, yet still remaining reliant on this account’s existence from her male kin, if her family could afford to do so. Also, upper-class family property and titles were ‘passed only to the eldest son… [or] to a distant cousin’ via the legal doctrine of primogeniture.’[[26]](#footnote-26) Often were forced to completely bypass their daughters, with focus on them becoming a wife and rearing a child, especially a son in order to further the family legacy and wealth for future generations rather than allow her to take full control of the family’s finances and property.

Victorian middle-class women had the option to work as a ‘governess, teacher, or dressmaker,’ until marriage, allowing some freedom from being a submissive companion, and from being completely dependent on the wealth of a man.[[27]](#footnote-27) Industry work ending at marriage supports legal theorist William Blackstone’s argument that ‘the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage.’[[28]](#footnote-28) As these women are steered towards domestic work, managing the household while ‘directing the servants’ and possible nannies, while she focuses on leisure rather than labour.[[29]](#footnote-29) Transforming these working women into a house companion, seen only as a mother and “lady of the manor” type figure who is there to raise the child, “keep-house” and satisfy her husband, being a “companion to man”. This transformation was common and encouraged, often celebrated as it was part of middle-class British culture to cultivate a home and maintain a relationship with her husband and her peers. These expectations created a stigma around women who never married they were seen as ‘socially problematic’ without a husband.[[30]](#footnote-30) Unmarried, middleclass women were largely affected by the lack of a husband, if she didn’t have a wealthy or generous brother for financial support also did not have the ability to ‘earn wages without losing their respectability,’ reinforcing the social barriers faced by these women and the expectations from their family, social peers, and husband.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Working class Victorian women, post industrialisation, started work in early childhood which paused during pregnancy and child rearing, then most returned to work alongside continuing to do housework, and most of the child rearing while their husband was at work. Establishing some independence from her husband by earning a wage in order to support her family, while not having complete access to these wages or property earned or bought with these earnings. This independence via joining the work force emulates the Bible in Genesis 2, as God created the animals there was ‘no suitable helper’ for Adam, so God created Eve as his helper and companion.[[32]](#footnote-32) This passage is echoed in the patriarchal structure of the Church which transfers to Victorian Britain’s societal structure with both pre-industrial and post-industrial work for women as a helper to her father then husband. With pre-industrial work with the ‘home and workplace [seen as] identical or overlapping and men and women worked side by side’ performing their different tasks to support their family.[[33]](#footnote-33) This interpretation of the passage and work itself argues that women’s industry work is equally contributing to the household finances and needs, while simultaneously being a male-dominated and patriarchal family unit. As some legal theorists ‘compared marriage to riding horseback together; when clearly “one must ride behind,”’ this could be interpreted as both are doing the same thing, riding the horse (managing the household, but with a leader (the man) is guiding them both towards financial success and stability.[[34]](#footnote-34) On the other hand, the term “helper” reinforces the description of Victorian women being a “companion to man” as this implies that women, Eve herself, are lesser to men, Adam, as woman comes from man and helps them in life also, in some versions of this passage describe her as a servant for Adam. With the horse analogy representing clear, divided roles with the one in front in charge of the household with the support of the wife, helping him by managing the domestic work and perhaps industry work in order to support her husband as Eve supports and helps Adam. The latter interpretation of the analogy supports the thinking of legal theorist William Blackstone, as he argued that ‘the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage.’[[35]](#footnote-35) Blackstone’s argument of women’s invisibility mirrors the oppression of women over the centuries, particularly up to the 1860s when women in Britain were encouraged to marry and have children and to avoid work as the men were seen as the sole “breadwinners” of a household until the Industrial Revolution.

Throughout the different classes of Victorian Britain, the description of women being a “companion to man” is accurate to a certain extent in different situations. Such as pre-1860s when women couldn’t access the work force, with their role and purpose was to please her father then husband then tend to her children and “keep house”. Within this time period women’s value was dictated solely by her marital and mother status and how much she supported her husband. These women were not allowed to have access to their property, finances and could not own property or inherit property nor titles due to ‘primogeniture.’[[36]](#footnote-36) Victorian women were easily discarded and disregarded due to the belief that women were weaker, more emotional, or hysterical therefore not listened to or taken seriously.

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