



# Victorian England

## An Introduction

# Age of Victoria (1837-1901)

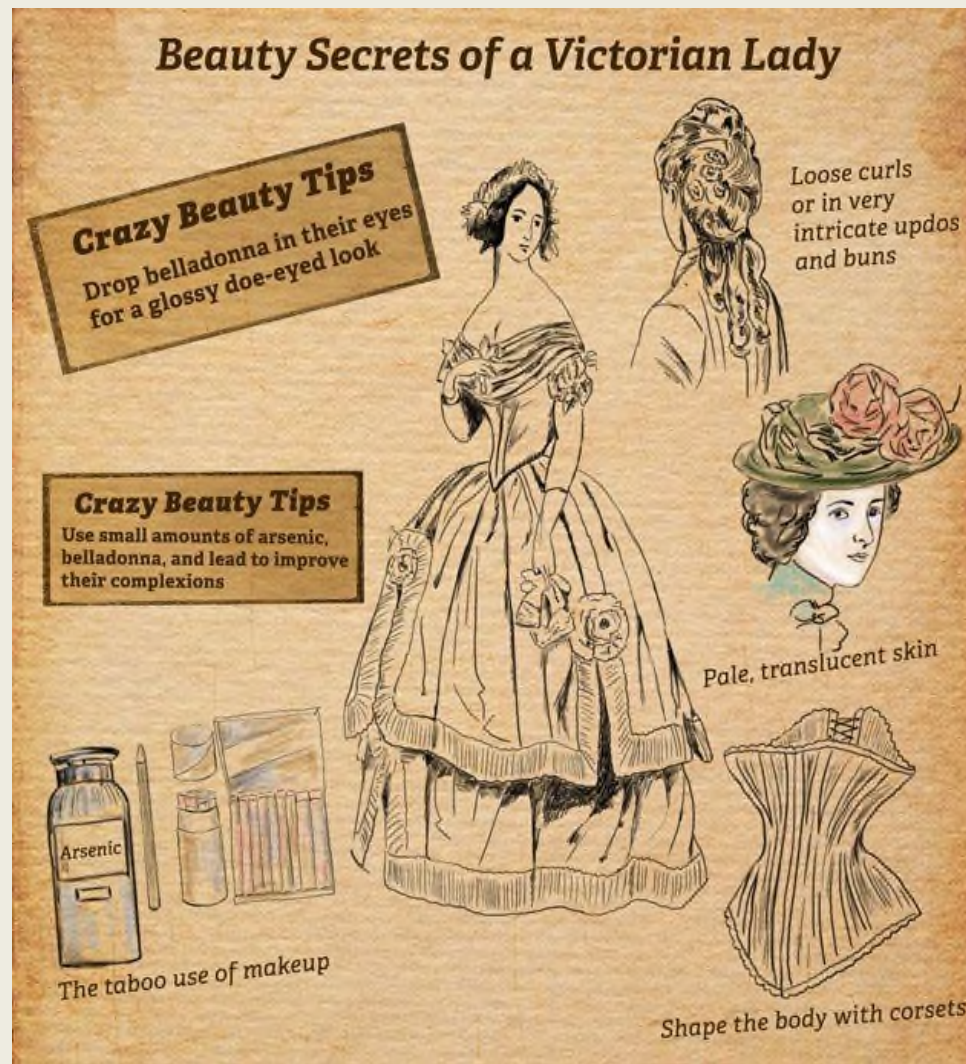
- First great reform act 1832 (1867, 1884-85)
- Poor and destitute suffered under the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834), which forced more of them into the workhouse systems and orphanages.
- The economic depressions and the resultant socio-industrial crises of the 'hungry forties' and the Irish Famine, brought about other momentous events such as the repeal of the Corn Laws (1846).

- Britain was beginning to shift from the old landowner class to a burgeoning class of industrialists, manufacturers and tradesmen, who were spurred by on by the new spirit of laissez-faire economics.
- This transformed Victorian Britain from a largely rural and agricultural society, based on a monopoly of landed and state-controlled interests, to an urban and industrial society, based on an increasing culture of individualism and capitalism.

# Perfect lady

- Prior to and at the beginning of the nineteenth century the ideal had been the “perfect wife”.
- The perfect wife was an active participant in the family, fulfilling a number of vital tasks, the first of which was **childbearing**. She was expected in the lower classes to contribute to the family income. In the middle classes she provided indirect economic support through the care of her children, the purchasing and preparation of food and the making of clothes.

- Victorians constructed a hierarchical gender relationship in the society.
- Men dominated the every available public or social sphere – politics, government, the law, economics, industry, commerce, education, sport and the administration of Victoria’s growing world empire.
- Women were less active – expected to confine themselves to the private and “passive” spheres of the home and the family.



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“Women are the proper legislators for, as well as ministers of, the interior” – Edinburgh Review

- However, the Victorian patriarch was dominant in the “interior” sphere as well. Due to the man’s status as husband, father, breadwinner and owner of all family ‘property’, he reigned supreme to all purposes.
- Most Victorian men believed that women did not possess the intellectual capacities which educated and industrious men were endowed with. Consequently male-dominated fields of education, such as universities, scholarships and research were inaccessible for women earlier on the century at least.



- Regarded by men as not being “of the mind” and so insufficiently “cultured”, women were treated as somewhat paradoxical figures “of the body” and “angels of the hearth” as at once physical and spiritual, as well as “naturally” all heart, tenderness and submission.
- Men also thought that women and their “natural” desires for reproduction were determined by their essential physicality, what male-authored medical textbooks described as their “uterine economy”. This biological determinism then became linked in Victorian consciousness with the motherly and wifely virtues of child-rearing and house-work that became associated with the role of women.

- The literary and cultural spheres of Victorian society were also male-dominated.
- Women writers were perceived to be a threat to men, to other women, and to themselves. The writing of novels, in terms of Victorian gender roles at least, was often considered a more “active” and hence potentially subversive task than reading.
- “Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation” Robert Southey in his letter to Charlotte Brontë

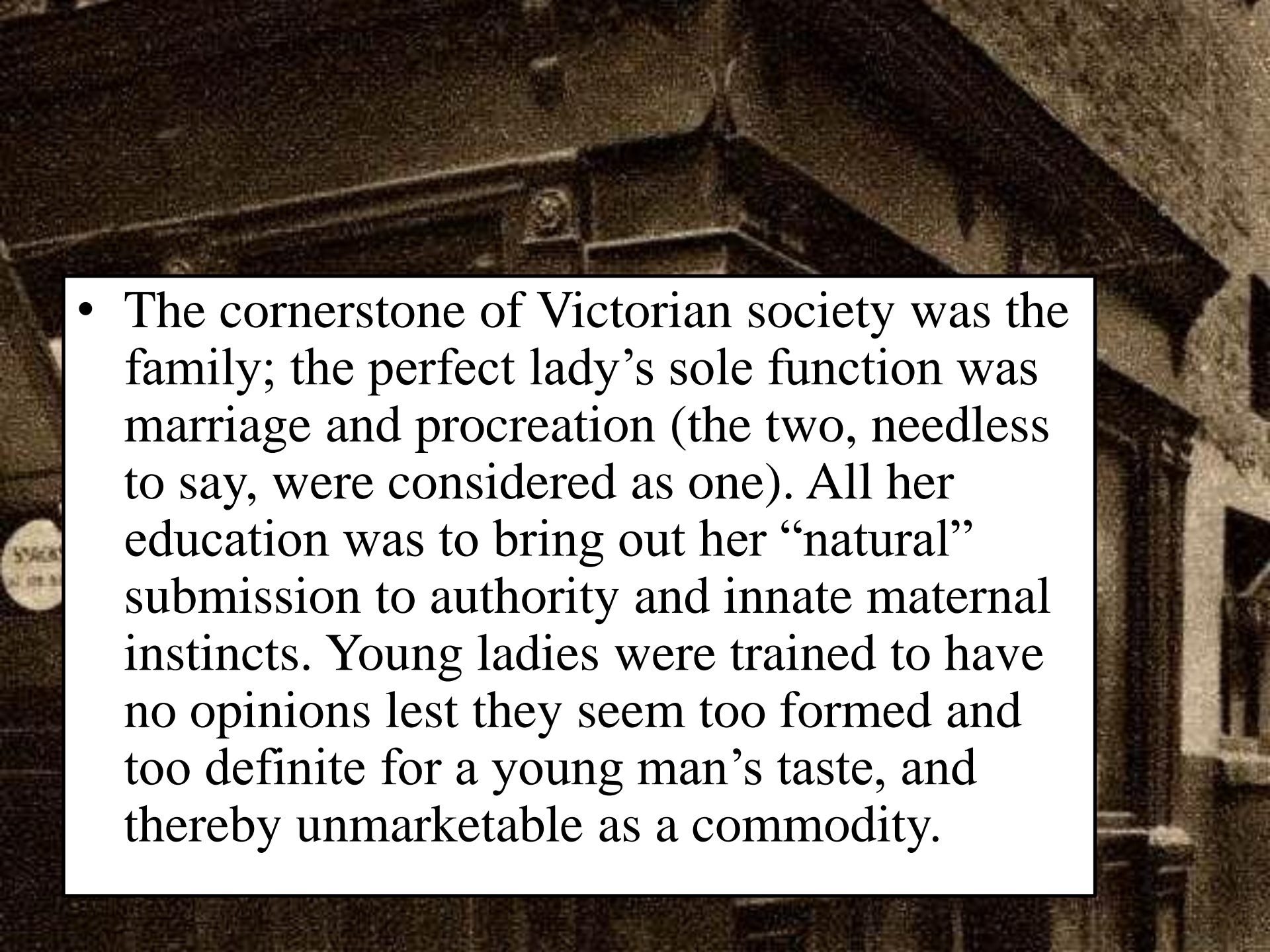


- “Man to command,  
women to obey/ All else  
confusion” – Tennyson’s  
“The Princess”
- “Yet it is my chosen  
task/ To sing her worth  
as Maid and Wife” -  
Coventry Patmore’s  
popular verse sequence,  
The Angel in the House  
(1854-6), provides a  
celebration of the  
Victorian woman’s role  
as meek and gentle  
virgin of the domestic  
sphere

# Family Values

- The concept of “family values” is frequently attributed to the Victorians, and at the public level the family ideal was promoted by the national figurehead herself, Queen Victoria.
- After her marriage to Albert in 180, Victoria’s life was held up as a paragon of wifely virtues, and her royal family, with its nine children, was portrayed as an English domestic idyll.



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- The cornerstone of Victorian society was the family; the perfect lady's sole function was marriage and procreation (the two, needless to say, were considered as one). All her education was to bring out her "natural" submission to authority and innate maternal instincts. Young ladies were trained to have no opinions lest they seem too formed and too definite for a young man's taste, and thereby unmarketable as a commodity.

# Marriage Acts

- Infant custody bill 1839 – enabled divorced or estranged women to apply for access to their children
- Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act 1857 – enabled women to apply for divorce themselves for the first time in British history.
- Married woman's property acts in 1870 and 1882 – enabled women to retain their own property and money

# New Woman

- Free-spirited and independent, educated and uninterested in marriage and children, the figure of the New Woman threatened conventional ideas about ideal Victorian womanhood

