The Myth of Victorian Prudery: Promoting an Image

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Historiography, the process of analyzing the primary and secondary historical documents of a period, enables modern history students to place the past in a context with the present.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-Victorian, raised by Victorians, "looked and lived according to prudery and hypocrisy... gained respectability without reality. . . . gained England a name for hypocrisy" (26). Yet, Peter Gay called 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, 16). Allen viewed these as a symptom of the 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 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 Pre-WWI 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 of Eminent Victorians his contempt of the Victorians, evident through Edmund Gosse's review. Goose criticized the search for what critics call prudery is rooted in 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, 16). Allen viewed these as a symptom of the 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 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).
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 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 virtue" (423). Pearsall did not challenge this account of 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 Capt. Marray, who when cited "one of the clichés of the period was the way sexual disgustment was expressed by hiding the legs of pianos and tables with coverings. Furniture legs were equated with human legs" (423). Pearsall did not question 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 peripheries 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 of Victorians were struggling away from (33). For the Victorians, "to acknowledge the existence of vice, was, they believed, to en-

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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 prude as a conventional woman, 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 the 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, ignorance (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[1] of vice" or of anything sensual because of their education through the superego: society stated that women did not have sexual 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. Victorian, 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 (351, 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 household was familiar with procedures for cutting off the heads of turkeys 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 Gladstone, a successful 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 toward his wife. Gay went on to argue that 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 "prudent prude", or self-moralizer, was the real Victorian hypocrite (378). Gay asserted that the works of these puritans, such as Anthony Comstock, were not representative of Victorian culture, but a reflection of what these reformers sought to become (379). The separation of spheres of what Froude called the "intimate" or "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 also a factor in forming 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 bourgeoisie, 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). Dorothy Lumis, another member of the Victorian bourgeoisie, 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 place" (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.

Works Cited