

Victorian airbrushing:
cultural, physical and artistic representations of upper-class women of then and today

by

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Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: Victorian Ideals and Conventions	8
Chapter Three: Feminine Ideals in <i>Peter Ibbetson</i>	27
Chapter Four: Impossible Female Perfection in <i>Tess of the D'Urbervilles</i>	39
Chapter Five: Conclusion	50
Works Cited	53

Chapter One: Introduction

Victorian social concerns do not differ greatly from the concerns of today: worries about the rights of women, God, religion, and government prevailed then as well. Eerie similarities persist between the two eras regarding social standards for feminine beauty. Elaine Showalter similarly echoes these thoughts: “Could there be cycles in time like cycles in the weather, like hurricanes and earthquakes, which are chaotic but not random?” (2). If these assertions possess truth, similarities between the feminine ideal for women then and today must exist. This essay contends that concern with the model woman, femininity, and virtue in the Victorian era continues through to today. Beyond that, the ideal physical model of feminine perfection was unattainable to the women then, just as it is to women today.

Similar to the current time period, advancements in technology within the Victorian era produced profound effects on the daily domestic lives of women (Crow 13). The invention of the sewing machine, gas and electricity in the kitchen, water systems, canning, and refrigeration, all contributed to more independence for women, whose daily lives became more efficient and streamlined through modern conveniences. However, even though life became physically easier, women still lived up to rigorous social standards. According to Crow, “As the middle-class gentility gained idleness through wealth, the image of the ideal Victorian lady was produced” (24). This image was not only produced, but also circulated throughout the society in all mediums and in all social classes, with the lower classes always aspiring to work themselves higher in the social stratosphere.

The physical representation and image of the model Victorian woman seems pervasive during the era, appearing in art, literature, poetry, culture, and sociological studies. Victorian novels, specifically, offered guidance for the proper ways for people to live and suggestion for those who might stray from the beaten path; novels were described as “pure, moral, and family-centered” by a French critic of English values, Hippolyte Taine (Marsden 53). Essentially, the adjectives Taine used to describe the 19th-century English novel could translate into adjectives that describe the ideal Victorian woman. Beyond that, descriptions of the expectations for women appear in the literature as well. Studying popular literature from the period including *Peter Ibbetson* (1891) by George Du Maurier and *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1895) by Thomas Hardy, will provide late-century examples of such representations of the ideal feminine woman.

Victorian paintings further explicate the era’s obsession with the perfect female specimen. Examples might include those by John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), a world-renowned painter recognized as “the most acclaimed international society portraitist,” who could boast a clientele that consisted of the society’s wealthiest and noblest families (National Gallery of Art). Often showcasing his work in major metropolitan art galleries, Sargent’s prolific career was often measured by his success in gaining portrait commissions in London, Paris, or America.

James Tissot (1836-1902), whose father was a prominent Victorian dressmaker and thus was undoubtedly aware of the ideal feminine body and fashions of the day, often combined his knowledge of ships and the female image, as he did in Figure 1. Having grown up near the sea, Tissot was quite fascinated with all things nautical (The James Tissot Organization). The Paris-trained Tissot was immensely popular in England, made

influential contacts within English society, and was eventually hired by *Vanity Fair* magazine to produce caricatures (The James Tissot Organization).

Works by these two artists provide an in-depth look at the expectations for a woman in the Victorian era. For example, Figure 1 denotes two upper-class women in the foreground of the painting, on a ship, both with dark hair, in elaborate dress—layers of bows and ruffles making the dresses incredibly intricate. Undoubtedly, these women hail from society’s highest class and are exemplary of the type of woman to which women in lower classes aspired—though could never be. Tissot’s eye for detail is immediately apparent, particularly on the fabric in the dresses. Painters like Tissot or Sargent provided examples of specific upper-class women.



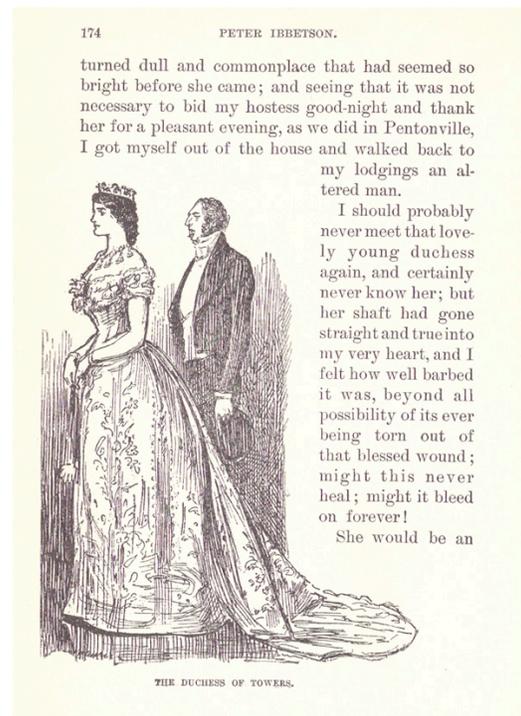
Figure 1: *The Gallery of HMS Calcutta* (1876) by James Tissot.

However, as Orr notes,

“Persons of the female sex did

not share a uniform social, economic, or cultural experience, so to speak of women as though they constitute an undifferentiated historical category is misleading” (1). Those figures in society, like Sargent or Tissot, with a certain degree of influence often specifically spelled out these expectations for women, based on their interactions with women of the upper classes.

George Du Maurier (1834-1896) gained prominence in his prolific career as a writer, illustrator, satirist, and comic of the widely read and highly influential magazine *Punch* (Allingham). Raised in Paris, Du Maurier was a “French trained artist turned professional comic illustrator” (Daly 22). According to Kelly and Young, “Satirists are essentially conservative and employ humor to bring to heel those people who stray too far from the accepted norms and traditions of society.” Late in his career, in the 1880s, as his eyesight began to fail, Du Maurier switched his artistic focus from cartoons and illustrations to watercolor painting and writing, publishing *Peter Ibbetson* in 1889, *Trilby*—a best-seller—in 1894, and finally *The Martian* in 1897 (Allingham). In a forward to Du Maurier’s *Peter Ibbetson*, Deems Taylor, looking back at Du Maurier’s body of work in 1932, observed this of Du Maurier’s own view of his career and his rendition of the feminine ideal:



Each [illustrator] was a social satirist; each was a master of pen and ink drawing and developed a

Figure 2: Du Maurier's "Duchess of Towers" (174).

highly individual technique in that medium that had many imitators. Each, too, chose to accentuate the grotesqueness of his caricatured human beings by placing them in juxtaposition to a race of super-beings that embodied his own ideal of human beauty, particularly feminine beauty. Each delineated that idea in such widely popular terms that he definitely influenced the physical appearance of his generation. Just as the American flapper of the early nineteen-hundreds did her best to dress and carry herself--if she could not hope to look--like a Gibson girl, so the English miss of the eighties yearned--and tried--to resemble a Du Maurier giantess. They were magnificent creatures, those Du Maurier women, long-

legged, straight-nosed, unearthly calm and unearthly tall (the Duchess of Towers, in the Ibbetson illustrations, is ten heads high; Peter averages about eleven). It they were not to be found in the living world, at least they made a magnificent national ideal, a sort of "look on this and do your best" for British womanhood (Taylor ix).

Figure 2, above, denotes Peter's primary standard of female excellence, drawn by the hand of George Du Maurier as the perfect Victorian female specimen—a woman whom Peter spends his life meeting mostly only within his dreams. Consequently, Peter spends his life confined to said dreamland. Another of Du Maurier's illustrations in *Peter Ibbetson* explicates his view of the feminine ideal, accompanied by this text: "She would be an ideal in my lonely life, to live up to in thought and word and deed. An instinct which I felt to be infallible told me she was as good as she was fair" (Du Maurier 145). Du Maurier mainly drew images of upper-class women, like the woman pictured in Figure 2. According to Kelly and Young, "Du Maurier rarely draws the lower classes. Not only did his editor advise him not to, but Du Maurier himself did not know or even care about that group. He found them to be ugly, dirty, noisy, and threatening. And that is how they are portrayed in the few cartoons he did of them." Someone of Du Maurier's social status would possess a firm idea of the prevailing feminine ideal, particularly someone who drew that ideal on a nearly regular basis.

Unlike Du Maurier, Taylor spins his conception of the image of the feminine ideal into a positive, though largely unattainable, domestic image of womanhood, removing or replacing the colonial stereotype held earlier in the century—that "unearthly tall" women were Amazonian or women of color.

Other prolific and well-known men perpetuated this stereotype of impossible standards for women as well. Examples exist not only in fiction but also in poetry. Poet

Laureate, Lord Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) certainly held a great degree of influence in Victorian England and often used his poems as an opportunity to comment on truths of Victorian society. Tennyson's poem "The Princess: A Medley" (1847) points toward this ideal image of feminine beauty in the prologue to the poem. Certainly, a princess is exemplary of an upper-class woman and Tennyson's princess, like Du Maurier's *giantess*, has a tall stature: "'Take Lilia, then, for heroine' clamoured he, / 'And make her some great Princess, six feet high, / Grand, epic, homicidal; and be you / The Prince to win her!'" (212-215). This famed poem enabled further saturation of the conception of the ideal woman.

Thomas Hardy, another well-known Victorian author, also used his work to make comments on society and the hypocrisy within it. Often, Hardy was called a forerunner of modernism within the Victorian era (Riquelme 9). Although Hardy's novels appeared during Victoria's reign and his focus on poetry developed largely into the Modern era (after *Jude the Obscure*, 1895), modernist themes emerge in his novels. Hardy's "timeless characters battle an equally timeless omnipotent and indifferent fate that is representative of modernism" (Rimmer 135). Still, Rimmer acknowledges connections made between Hardy's intellectual concerns and those of other Victorians, making it clear that the direction Hardy took was often "idiosyncratic and ambivalent" (139). Hardy, unlike most other writers, acknowledged the ills of society and worked to combat them, while still following many Victorian conventions—particularly those regarding women.

Today's society, much like that of the Victorians, certainly perpetuates these impossible standards of female beauty permeating the culture in music, art, entertainment, and fashion. The existence of a female beauty standard is not new; it

persists today, just as heavily as in Victorian England more than a hundred years ago. Just as before, the wealthy are those most likely to attain the standards of beauty—largely because wealthy or upper middle-class women possess the leisure time and finances to strive to live up to these standards: the airbrushing of today, to make the beautiful even more perfect, has merely replaced the corsets of that day.

The term “airbrushing” in this essay of course refers not to the literal act of physically altering a woman’s looks through methods commonly used in media advertisements or photography, but metaphorically, in the sense of changing a woman’s appearance in order to perfect her, in the depths of one’s mind.

Chapter Two: Victorian Social Ideas and Conventions

Research shows that human societies in the Stone Age were structured around the matriarch. These women were powerful and in control of their own sexuality and beings. However, Victorian society was clearly and undoubtedly patriarchal. According to Eley, “The family, then, unlike to-day, was a self-sufficient unit of which father was the head and for whom home was indeed his castle” (2). Within the Victorian era, patriarchy was the primary social rule and thus, women’s rights became increasingly constrained (Reed 34). Beyond that, women were generally thought of as the lesser, weaker sex. This assertion was made clear by current day scientific “knowledge.” In 1840, Dr. Alexander Walker asserted the weakness of the female population: “It is evident that the man, possessing reasoning faculties, muscular power, and courage to employ it, is qualified for being a protector: the woman, being little capable of reasoning, feeble and timid, requires protection. Under such circumstances, the man naturally governs: the woman as naturally obeys” (qtd. in Perkin 1). Assertions like Dr. Walker’s perpetuated this notion of natural female subservience even further, giving it staying power by using scientific theory as the basis for his argument so it appeared to be a question of fact rather than value.

Early models of female excellence valued qualities like morality, chastity, and nurturance (Caine 88). In *The Leisure Hour*, from December 1856, an essay entitled, “What a woman should be Alphabetically” listed the following necessary traits for all model women to possess: “Amiable, Benevolent, Charitable, Domestic, Economical, Forgiving, Generous, Honest, Industrious, Judicious, Kind, Loving, Modest, Neat, Obedient, Pleasant, Quiet, Reflecting, Sober, Tender, Urbane, Virtuous, ‘Xemplary,

Zealous. In short, feminine” (qtd. in Nunn 9). These adjectives contrast sharply with those traits desirable for men: Affectionate, Bold, Candid, Daring, Enterprising, Faithful, Grateful, Honourable, Indefatigable, Just, Kind, Loving, Moral, Noble, Obliging, Polite, Quick, Religious, Social, Truthful, Upright, Valiant, Watchful, ‘Xemplary, and Zealous” (qtd. in Nunn 14). Obviously these lists seem incongruous. The list for women seems exceedingly passive and placating; the list for men encourages activity and adventure. Reed believes that legally and socially, women were oppressed, but in most cases, left without an alternative, the women went along with this notion even if they did not necessarily condone their own subjugation (35).

However, and despite some staunch advocacy for the powerlessness of women, as early as the 1730s Mary Astell asserted this notion: “If there was a difference in intellect between men and women (a point by no means conceded) a great deal of it must be due to educational training. If girls were given the same education as boys it might then, and only then, be possible to discover if there was any innate differences between them in mental abilities” (Forster 133). Obviously, if given the same chances, women would attain a more equal playing field to men of their same class.

Mid-century, women began to fight for more rights and freedoms. British women began the fight for emancipation in the 1850s and 1860s, parallel with a similar movement in the United States (Caine 88). Social reform concerning women began to reconcile issues like married women’s property and female education (Caine 91): “Questions about the nature and the situation and the demands of women began to feature in the popular imagination—as *Punch* cartoons of the late 1880s and 1890s, featuring powerful and athletic women on bicycles or cricket fields, or bullying effeminate men at

cocktail parties, serve to show” (Caine 131). However, these images often poked fun at these types of New Woman rather than complimented their efforts.

Finally, by the 1890s—the era that coined the terms “feminist, suffragist, and suffragette”—images of the Victorian feminine ideal began to fade away, replaced by images of the New Woman: the “conventional female ideal was challenged by contrasting images of women: as militant and martyred in the style of Joan of Arc; as strong and composed professional women, especially doctors, lawyers, and Members of Parliament, or, for anti-suffragists, as drunken slatterns, shrewish housewives and neglectful and immoral wives and mothers” (Caine 131-134). Unsurprisingly, the New Woman was wracked with nerves: “Doctors linked the New Woman with an epidemic of nervous disorders including anorexia, neurasthenia, and hysteria with the changes in women’s aspirations” (Showalter 40). The New Woman was not safe against the scrutiny of doctors, or the attention of popular editors and authors.

The New Woman began to appear in fiction, drama and the popular press around this time as well (Caine 133). Using a literary example, in Hardy’s prefatory notes to *Jude the Obscure* (1895), he characterized his female protagonist as “the woman of the feminist movement—the slight, pale, ‘bachelor’ girl—the intellectualized emancipated bundle of nerves the modern conditions were producing, mainly in cities” (Showalter 40). Many showed concern regarding a woman’s newfound independence and her changing view of the necessity of marriage: if she can provide for herself, she would no longer require a husband for financial security (Gardiner 2).

The New Woman faced intense hostility as she appeared on the scene, realizing she had alternatives to marriage, being sexually liberated and university educated—the main fears stemming from her challenge to the once male-dominated artistic scene, the



Figure 3: *Punch* cartoon of the New Woman (1895).

occupational scene, and in the home (Showalter 38). According to Showalter, the magazine *Punch* fought back hard against this new convention of womanhood, with a parody or cartoon of the New Woman appearing in almost every issue. Figure 3 above, illustrated by Du Maurier himself, represents numerous cartoons published in *Punch* that display the hostility of a patriarchal society towards independent women: Imagine, a man being forced to put forth effort and actually search for a woman in order to dance with her. Unsurprisingly, men of the general populace resisted this change as well: “The more women pushed, the more men vigorously opposed. Such eager resistance may now appear strange, but to the Victorian mind, an independent woman challenged moral and social assumptions that Victorians considered essential to a stable society. Furthermore, such a woman promised to be dangerously uncontrollable” (Reed 36). The New Woman functioned antithetical to conventional Victorian society.

Fashion

When Victoria ascended the throne, women had “wasp waists, moulded bosoms, and rounded skirts” (Perkin 95). However, fashion soon changed dramatically, even for young girls. According to Torrens, “Women’s clothing was a site of struggle against deeply entrenched ideologies of gender. Nineteenth century women’s dress symbolized female subjugation” (189). Despite this argument, women who could afford to found it imperative to dress according to the latest style.

In a girl’s late teens, fashion pressed her onward to womanhood: “Her clothes became a carapace. She was laced into stays which molded her waist to as near twenty-one inches as possible—less, if it could be achieved; but certainly not over twenty-five. She was arrayed in the elaborate long dresses of maturity. She was furnished with a small trousseau to take her on formal visits to her country houses” (Crow 297). According to Perkin, “Fashionable dress of the era produced more female dependence and weakness, as clothes became ever more constricting—much changed from the flowing, loose soft lines made by dresses earlier in the century” (95). Women of all social classes were interested in fashion, particularly those women in the upper classes whose rank was displayed by the intricacy and complexity of their dresses: “Every cap, bow, steamer, ruffle, fringe, bustle, glove, and other elaboration signaled some difference in status” (Perkin



Figure 4: *Les Journal des demoiselles* (1891).

93). In the case of Victorian women, beauty truly was painful. Above, Figure 4 displays not only the elaborate nature and the complexity of an upper class woman's Victorian dress, but also the impossibly small waistline and fragility of these two delicate women that are most definitely wearing waist-minimizing garments, despite the pain such devices promised. Corsets, made of whalebone or wood, which allowed the waist to measure at an impossibly small twenty-four or twenty-five inches at most, caused women "stomach ulcers, gallstones, dislocation of the ribs, headaches, dizziness, curvature of the spine, lung disease and sickly offspring, but few women took any notice" (Perkin 94). Most women with the necessary financial means enjoyed wearing elaborate dresses. Pauline Astor, shown in Figure 5, the eighteen-year old and eldest daughter of immensely wealthy New York financier William Waldorf Astor, was no exception (Huntington). Ms. Astor's voluminous dress, combining silk and fur, could no doubt be described as both extravagant and elegant.

According to Crow, the 1850s was a decade when "extravagance in dress is one of the prevailing vices of the age" (119). By 1856, one silk dress required twenty yards of material and it was "obvious that some new sub-structure must be introduced if women were not to collapse into immovable heaps on the ground" (Crow 121). Thus, in 1856, women began to wear crinolines (Perkin 95). Crinolines, deriving from the French *crin*, made of horse-hair stiffened fabric, worked to create massive and inconvenient domes (Crow 122). Beyond that, the



**Figure 5: Portrait of Pauline Astor (1898)
by John Singer Sargent.**

crinolines caused much danger and inconvenience—as is the case in today’s society, fashion was more important than function.

Female fashion became the most complex between 1866 and 1880. Dressmakers worked to create more complicated outfits than ever before out of yards and yards of fabric: “utility, comfort, and convenience, did not matter” (Perkin 95). A woman’s concern rested solely in her appearance. The dresses accentuated the woman’s behind using shaped horsehair or steel buckles. Sleeves of dresses, though their design changed dramatically—from tight, off the shoulder, puffy, or frilly—throughout the era, immobilized women’s arms (Perkin 96). Fashionable dress was a luxury afforded only to those who had servants to dress them and launder their clothes. Rich women were able to keep their clothes cleaner, as they could avoid walking on muddy streets or in the rain (Perkin 96). Beyond that, walking around through muddy streets was not conducive to good health and cleanliness (Crow 120). Victorian painters could capture women in their most perfect moments.

Women in Art

Women were often depicted in art as society encouraged them to carry themselves in life. For example, in George Elgar Hicks’s narrative triptych, called *Woman’s Mission* (1863), on display at the Royal Academy of Arts in London Hicks composed images of the same woman with three different men: her husband, her son, and her father. Hicks defines the woman in terms of her relationship with these three men; he validates her life through her purpose to these men. Her ability to consider herself a woman largely rests on her ability to fulfill her duty to them. According to Nead, “mission” was the term

coined by contemporaries to “describe the roles of the feminine ideal and activated all the values of duty, fulfillment, and moral purity which were commonly associated with respectable femininity” (12-13). Essentially, without men in her life to care for, a woman had little purpose.

Female artists that could successfully enter the art field often found themselves accused of using their art to comment on gender and class politics (Losano 99). Certainly, the fears of those who desired to keep women oppressed were not unfounded:

“According to George Eliot, painting was the medium in which women could best demonstrate social power” (Losano 1). Thus, those who enjoyed the patriarchal aspects of society endeavored to keep women from creating art themselves, while simultaneously capturing women who met their ideals of beauty and expected societal roles within it.

Sexuality

In Victorian England, sex was simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. It lurked, ever present, in the shadows. Here, nude statues were considered inappropriate (Crow 27). In order to promote modesty, “piano legs were covered and referred oft to, as limbs, so as not to connote a body part” (Crow 26). A woman’s skirt was often bell-shaped, revealing only her toes, rendering the imagination of the shape of a woman’s leg rather unfeasible (Crow 25). Essentially, sex could never be addressed nor acknowledged: “It was important to drive sex out of the respectable household. Ideally, women would produce children by parthenogenesis....Silence was important. If what went on in the dark bedroom was never mentioned, then, by a reversal of the psychological process which gives substance to a thought merely by the naming of it, sex could be

dematerialized by ignoring it” (Crow 25). If ever a society should have felt sexually repressed, it would certainly be those living in the age of Queen Victoria:

With the emergence of sexology at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the Victorian age began to be portrayed as an era of sexual repression. This image took on a renewed significance in the 1960s and 1970s. With the idea of sexual liberation and the shift towards a new ‘permissiveness,’ the Victorian age was seen as the paradigm of sexual and moral hypocrisy. It was characterized as a period of public purity and private vice, with an outward show of respectability hiding an underbelly of pornography and prostitution. (Nead 2)

At the height of the Victorian double standard between men and women were all things sexual. In a Victorian context, a virtuous woman held no knowledge of sexual desire nor had ever felt the twinges of sexuality. Dr. William Acton, who specialized in treating venereal disease and prostitution, constructed his perfect picture of womanhood as “a perfect ideal of an English wife and mother, kind, considerate, self-sacrificing, and sensible, so pure-hearted as to be utterly ignorant and averse to any sexual indulgence, but so unselfishly attached to the man she loves, as to be willing to give up her own feelings and wishes for his sake” (Nead 19). Basically, a woman should live her life solely for her husband and family.

Even if a doctor would recognize female sexuality, his view was confined to sexuality with the context of marriage. In a publication from the 1840s, *On Single and Married Life*, Dr. Culverwell asserted his belief that healthy sexual desire could exist, but only in reference to specific contexts: marriage and reproduction: “Orgasm, desire, and pleasure are permitted, but only within the confines of marriage” (Nead 20). Thus, no explanation for a woman’s sexual appetite could enter the discussion successfully. Other medical books completely disregarded female pleasure at all, whether in a marital context

or otherwise, stating that if a woman felt pleasure, she showed a “disturbing abnormality” (Crow 52).

In order to be considered respectable, a woman must be dependent, delicate, and fragile. Dependence was not only expected, it was thrust upon women through whatever avenue was necessary—economically, legally, medically, and culturally (Nead 28).

Parents who were considered respectable purposefully kept their daughters uninformed in matters of sex, believing this lack of information may keep them “pure” (Perkin 52).

However, men most certainly also lusted after women who could fulfill their needs sexually: “Perhaps a good part of Victorian manhood lusted after a woman whose experience qualified her as a lover, while her repentance sanctioned her as a wife and mother” (Reed 77). This separation between the conception of a woman being both a public and private version of herself was at the heart of the differences in perspective between men and women:

Yet both ideals [those of men and women] continued side by side down the century, with most women pretending to be as men wished them to be, but at the same time developing their own identities. Men’s idea was of a decoratively idle, sexually passive woman, pure of heart, religious, and self-sacrificing. The most popular image was of an ‘angel in the house,’ an ivy-like wife who was also a doting and self-abnegating mother, clinging to her husband on whom she was totally dependent. There is hardly an example of a novel written by a man before 1860, in which the principal woman character is not insignificant in both mind and body.... It was women writers such as Jane Austen, the Brontës, and George Eliot who portrayed women of independent mind and strong passions. George Meredith was the first male writer to show he knew more of the female character (*The Egoist*), and what he did for fiction, Ibsen did for drama. They analyzed women as people in their own right, not simply as adjuncts to men. (Perkin 86)

However, these literary examples were not filtered through the society until nearly the end of the century. Until then, and often after as well, women were forced to create dual,

and often conflicting, versions of themselves until the society was willing to view them as they truly were.

It was not until the end of the century that doctors began to acknowledge women's sexual desires and needs—even claiming then that there may be psychological and biological ramifications to celibacy: “In 1882, Dr. Charles Taylor suggested that unmarried women must protect their health by finding other outlets for their ‘unemployed functions’” (Showalter 21). Though Taylor suggested legitimate physical activity, reading, or sewing, women found it hard to accept that actual danger might stem from remaining celibate (Showalter 21). Care was also taken within the culture to prevent self-gratification by both women and men: instruments preventing masturbation were readily available (Crow 26). Society as a whole was bound to these sexual standards.

Sexuality was heavily muted in literature as well; authors did not discuss details of the sexual act. Beyond the fact that most authors were unwilling to incorporate the details of intimate scenes into the pages of their novels, often times circulating libraries, like Mudie's, would not solicit books with even the “faintest suspicions of sex” (Crow 26).

Female Promiscuity

Because women were not allowed to have sexual desires and because a woman was expected to act submissively toward her husband, female adultery was inexcusable in any context. Furthermore, a woman could never recover from her indiscretion:

For a woman, an act of adultery actually violated her femininity; it was unnatural and unavoidable. The belief that sexual deviancy and its effects were somehow permanent and unalterable was an important mechanism in the categorization of female sexuality. It was necessary for the boundaries between the permissible and

the forbidden to appear incontrovertible. For women there could be no movement from one category to another; a fall from virtue was final. (Nead 49)

However, the terms “prostitute” and “fallen woman” were not interchangeable (Nead 95). In order to “fall” from her position, a woman must come from respectable society (Nead 95). Perhaps John Stores Smith illuminated this distinction best: “There is a fine distinction between the maiden who submits to the consummation before the ceremony, and her who systematically consents to lend her body out for a consideration” (Nead 96). Institutions like the Magdalen Hospitals also acknowledged this difference, holding distinct rooms for women who had been seduced by men promising marriage and then deserted (Nead 96).

Despite the notion that the prostitute and the fallen woman had dissimilarities, their literary fate was often similar: “Most popular literature tended to equate loss of virtue with moral corruption. These women were often associated with gypsies and the outcast life, showing that fallen women were inevitably classed among the aliens of society” (Reed 59). The theme of the fallen woman appeared and reappeared in the public sphere in works of poetry, fiction, and theater—for example, Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Jenny* (1870) works as a notable example. The novel *Ruth* (1853) by Elizabeth Gaskell offers a new vantage point in the convention. She, and later George Eliot, would suggest that blame for the sexual offense should lie with the man responsible—he who lacked self-control (Reed 63). Sadly, any evidence, or even speculation of female promiscuity skewed a woman’s chance for a respectable marriage to a near impossibility.

Marriage

Women entered the “marriage market” around age seventeen (Perkin 52). Aristocratic parents and lawyers negotiated until they agreed with a suitor on the terms of their child’s marriage. These contracts seem quite similar to the pre-nuptial agreements of today. Parental consent was necessary, for both men and women of all classes, until the child reached age twenty-one (Perkin 52). Getting married was often the sole focus for young women, second only to producing a male heir to carry on the husband’s family name. In the aristocratic upper class, this was the single most important task for a woman within her marriage. Marriage arrangements within the upper class were often treated primarily as business arrangements. Parents supervised visits of engaged children not so much to protect a daughter’s innocence, but to protect their daughter’s marriage arrangements from a man who might try to take advantage of her before the contracts were signed: “A major dilemma facing the young woman, instructed that love and marriage were her purposes in life, was the attempt to combine the two” (Reed 106). Some women did not even bother to consider actually falling in love. Charlotte Brontë once said, it was “romantic folly to wait for the awakening of what the French call *une grande passion*”...for “no young lady should fall in love till the offer has been made—the wedding ceremony performed and the first year of wedded life had passed away” (Perkin 53). Beyond all this, being in love was considered unladylike (Crow 39). Displaying such passion was inappropriate for the ideal woman.

While G.R. Drysdale proposed in 1854 that many marriages were based on ulterior motives and that a marriage of true love between both parties could only be found in the pages of fiction, marriage was certainly the “be-all, end-all” for most women and

certainly a case could be made that this is still true today. Further supporting this notion, a 1841 book on feminine perfection asserted that “A female’s real existence only begins when she has a husband”—thus helping to establish the popular Victorian viewpoint (Reed 105). Any female future that did not include marriage seemed bleak and hollow; widely read literature seemed to support this assertion: “Popular fiction presupposed marriage as the happiest state in life, implying that most marriages were successful, save only those where an obvious vice upset domestic order” (Reed 105). Sadly, many couples did not see literature mirror reality.

Much emphasis was placed on and much attention was paid to the importance of wedlock, despite the differing attitudes surrounding marriage. Even Queen Victoria asserted, in an 1858 letter to her daughter, that “being married gives one one’s position which nothing else can” (Perkin 75). Studies confirm that women who recorded their feelings found marriage to be a satisfying experience. Perkin, noting that even so-called Victorian feminists were “ambivalent in their attitudes toward a husband and family,” believed that the majority of women “avoided the unmarried state like the plague” (75). Beyond acknowledging that a marriage may start off without the best foot forward, it seems Victorian women also saw right through the subjugation marriage would bring and accepted the unhappy truth without question. Forward-thinking men could acknowledge this idea as well. John Stuart Mill saw the “central oppressive relationship for women as that of marriage,” though he did believe that marriage was the “normal state for the majority of women” and that their primary job was to oversee their family rather than have a job—that was their primary social contribution (Caine 104).

Though the main concerns for all women within a marriage were similar, the marriage stakes were much higher in the upper classes: “Throughout the century, marriage played a central role in mobilizing wealth and power. Some young people voluntarily extricated themselves from love affairs of which their parents disapproved. Some aristocratic women followed their hearts, such as Lady Charlotte Henry: “financially her marriage to Anthony Bacon was disastrous, but their devotion to one another was legendary” (Perkin 53). Though some middle class women eloped against the wishes of their parents, middle-class women often chose mates whom their parents approved; the concerns of finance and titles were less notable. These women sought to marry men with whom they had things in common, like religion, intellect, and philanthropic interests (Perkin 54).

Though a woman was such an important figure within the domestic sphere, after marriage she possessed little power: “By marriage, husband and wife became one person in law—and that person was he. He had almost complete control over her body, and their children belonged to him. Unless a marriage settlement arranged things differently, the husband was entitled to all his wife’s property, and he could claim any money she earned” (Perkin 73). In addition, a wife was considered the property of her husband. Ironically, in the marriage services performed by the Church of England, a man vows to give up his possessions to his wife, yet it is she who loses everything. Her only consolation remained that her husband was responsible for her physical person and any acquired debt as long as she remained living under his roof (Perkin 74). According to Crow, “Property, liberty, earnings, even a wife’s conscience, all belonged to her husband, as did the children she might bear. She could sign no contract, make no will, cast no

vote—a disability she shared also with unmarried women” (147). Marriage laws continued to subjugate women throughout the entirety of the century: “Until 1857 it was impossible for a woman to get a divorce, except in extremely rare cases by the aristocratic wealth. Until 1884, a woman could be imprisoned for denying sex to her husband and until 1891, a man could prevent his wife from leaving him by force” (Crow 147). Women faced a great disadvantage in the Victorian era, but women of the upper classes tended to possess more freedoms than women in other classes.

Unmarried Women vs. Unmarried Men

Beginning in 1861, after the government ran a national English census, news spread, creating national alarm, that there were a steadily increasing number of unmarried women over single men (Showalter 19). These single women, forced to compete with men for jobs to support themselves, were referred to as “odd gloves” (Showalter 19). Men, on the other hand, were not referred to as odd if they chose to remain single—instead, it was suggested that they simply had better things to do, as Grant Allen posited:

In America, the young man has gone West. In England, he is in the army, in the navy, in the Indian Civil Service, in the Cape Mounted Rifles. He is sheep-farming in New Zealand, ranching in Colorado, growing tea in Assam, planting coffee in Ceylon; he is a cowboy in Montana, or a wheat-farmer in Manitoba, or a diamond-digger at Kimberley, or a merchant in Melbourne; in short, he is everywhere and anywhere, except where he ought to be, making love to the pretty girls in England. For, being a man, I, of course, take it for granted that the first business of a girl is to be pretty. (qtd. in Showalter 25)

People neglected to recognize that if given the choice between simply being pretty and exploring the world, some women might also choose to remain single (Showalter 26).

Instead, unmarried women often became governesses, as in the case of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*: “Charlotte Brontë was tortured by the inanity that was forced on women”

(Crow 67). Women could seldom provide themselves with financial security in the position because of the low pay. Often governesses started off at only 25£ per year and rarely ever earned up to 80£ per year, even in the best situations (Crow 66-68). A governess position was also looked down upon in society. Clearly, for unmarried women life was difficult and often poverty stricken, but women had few alternatives, especially those in the lower classes.

Motherhood

Motherhood was not only a Victorian woman's duty, but also her destiny: "Motherhood was regarded as the most valuable and natural component of a woman's mission; it was woman's main reason for being and her chief source of pleasure. Maternal love was considered the apex of feminine purity and as an unattainable model for all other human relationships" (Nead 26). Essentially, a Victorian woman's greatest purpose was to produce and love children.

Beyond destiny, being a mother—in the eyes of the Victorians—granted health benefits: "Early marriage, prolific childbearing and breastfeeding" were seen as the ways to guarantee a woman's wellbeing. In fact, when a woman deferred from these norms, her "social deviancy is also defined as medical abnormality" (Nead 26). A woman could not simply choose a childless life—if she did, society viewed her as anomalous.

Pregnancy was not discussed in polite society. If a pregnant woman actually went out in public, which was not often the case, capacious clothes concealed the increasing size of the mother's belly. Once the child was born, class differences greatly negated differences in child rearing. For women of the upper classes and specifically, the

aristocracy, mothers had little to do with their children after physically giving birth to them. The child was placed with a wet nurse, either to give the mother more free time or because the baby could not suckle (Perkin 66). Beyond her children, a woman's greatest responsibility was her residence.

Domesticity

The one sphere where a woman could feel a certain amount of influence was in her home:

The purity of domestic life was maintained by the influence and attendance of the respectable woman. In this way the ideologies of the home and the feminine ideal reinforced each other, women's moral and sexual purity guaranteed the home as a haven and a shelter of social stability, and in turn, feminine purity itself was ensured through the shelter and protection of the domestic sanctuary. (Nead 33)

In order to have a home, a woman must remain pure. Though a woman had very little power and very few rights, she certainly had a large amount of responsibility placed upon her: "Woman was believed to play a central role in the formation of public morality; she was responsible for the purity of the home, and the private morality was the source and index of public morality. The moral condition of the nation, therefore, was believed to derive from the moral standards of woman" (Nead 92). Certainly, the task before a woman, then, seemed ominous.

Victorian women could derive a sense of self-respect from keeping a good house. Despite the challenges, such as ill-planned houses and bug infestations, housewives took pride in maintaining the home space (Perkin 88). However, a woman's focus in the home could never center on herself. According to Crow, "A woman's object in domestic life should be 'the promotion of the happiness of others, especially her husband'" (52).

Another popular literary series by Mrs. Beton claimed that the exemplary Victorian wife should be an “early riser and also: clean, frugal, hospitable, good tempered, and discriminating in her choice of friends. Her day’s great event was dinner” (Crow 134). Certainly, it would be difficult to argue that a woman’s place was not in her home.

Chapter Three: Feminine Ideals in *Peter Ibbetson*¹

“Airbrushed” women appear regularly in George Du Maurier’s *Peter Ibbetson* (1889), always perfectly polished and certainly presented as a model for other women of all classes—though the standard is nearly impossible to reach for the majority of women. Certainly, Deems Taylor did not draw his observations on Du Maurier’s work from obscurity. The foundation for his case could be made easily in *Peter Ibbetson*, as a standard of the feminine ideal arises from its pages. Beyond that, many of the stereotypes of female appearance and virtue within Victorian society described in the last chapter are ever present in the text. A feminine ideal will emerge from this chapter, created by Peter Ibbetson, a discerning young French boy who spends his life chasing, but never quite attaining his standard of perfection. As Peter grows older, his ideal of feminine beauty climbs higher and higher; he constantly replaces one woman with another—none of whom ever meet his expectations.

This whole story feels negated by an obsession with beautiful people and things. A flesh and blood real woman cannot attain Peter’s ideal of beauty, the idealized image of feminine perfection he has housed within his mind—only the one he himself created within his dream. Certainly the women Peter mounts on his pedestal cannot match his standard of perfection, as he readily admits when he sketches his most perfectly ideal woman differently than she physically appears. This book is one of many Victorian novels that propel the image of perfection forward and continue to perpetuate the ideal depiction of a woman through the end of the Victorian era.

¹ All images in this section were illustrated by George Du Maurier and can be found in his original text.

To begin, the image of beauty is central to Peter Ibbetson's being; he constantly studies and judges women, flowers, music, and art—often noticing even the most miniscule details like a woman's eyes and eyelashes. Truly, Peter composes himself as an authority on the pleasing aesthetic, much like a member of upper-class society would be familiar with all aspects surrounding the finer culture.

Peter was born into a family with servants, a housekeeper, a nurse, and a cook, Françoise—whom Peter remembers meeting with his mother every morning to discuss dinner—a very typical three servant household for a middle-class boy (229). Peter sets himself up as an authority due to his well-educated parents, his own quality education, and his ability to speak fluent French (12-13). Like Du Maurier, Peter also spent his childhood in Paris. Peter began discerning his ideal image of beauty from a young age.

For much of Peter's short life, his mother was his ideal of beauty and her image, shown in Figure 6 contrasted with Madame Seraskier, largely aligns with Taylor's view of Du Maurier's giantess: "My tall and beautiful young mother (*la belle* Madame Pasquier as she was gallantly called) was an Englishwoman who had been born and partly brought up in Paris" (25). She had done her duty as a Victorian woman, producing a son for her husband.

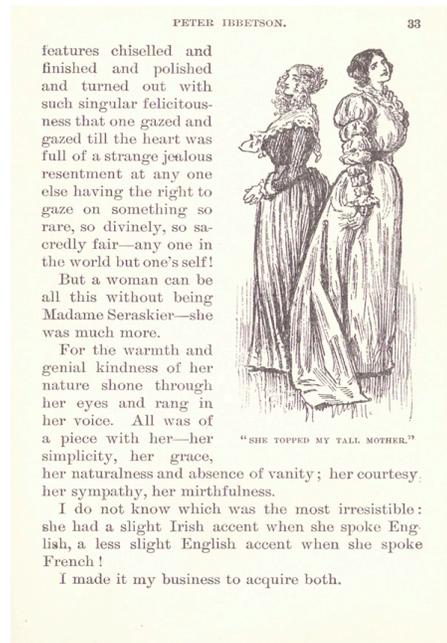


Figure 6: Peter's "tall and beautiful" mother compared to Madame Seraskier (33).

However, once Peter lays his eyes upon Madame Seraskier, whose beauty cannot even be expressed into words by poets, he

perceives her as his new feminine ideal and focuses all of his attention toward memorizing every inch of her perfection (35). She tops even his mother in beauty and in height, “by more than half a head” (22). Peter estimates that Madame Seraskier’s height was about 5’11” and she was physically breathtaking. From even his first impression of her, it seems obvious that he quickly begins to “airbrush” the ideal traits of a virtuous Victorian woman upon her—those moral and personal characteristics he could not yet know from a simple casual observation. Already, it appears Madame Seraskier is a premier example of Du Maurier’s ideal woman:

She had black hair and blue eyes—of the kind that turn violet in a novel—and beautiful white skin, lovely hands and feet, a perfect figure, and features chiseled and finished and polished and turned out with such singular felicitousness that one gazed and gazed till the heart was full of a strange jealous resentment at any one else having the right to gaze on something so rare, so divinely, so incredibly fair—any one in the world but one’s self...For the warmth and genial kindness of her nature shone through her eyes and rang in her voice. All was of a piece with her—her simplicity, her grace, her naturalness and absence of vanity; her courtesy, her sympathy, her mirthfulness. (33)

Madame Seraskier, speaking in “musical, sweet, and sympathetic tones,” was the essence of Peter’s feminine ideal and certainly exemplary of one of Du Maurier’s famed giantesses. Beyond her physical beauty, Peter pictured her as “a model for everyone’s heart and mind,” which seems particularly evident through her devotion to her invalid daughter, Mimsey, whose looks contrasted with her mother’s in nearly every way. Thus, not only was Madame Seraskier beautiful, but also she was pure of heart and virtuous—essentially an ideal woman.

Her poor little daughter, the object of her passionate solicitude, a very clever and precocious child, was the reverse of beautiful, although she would have had fine eyes except for her red lashless lids. She wore her thick hair cropped short, like a boy, and was pasty and sallow in complexion, hollow-cheeked, thick-featured, and overgrown, with long thin hands and feet, and arms and legs of quite pathetic

length and tenuity; a silent and melancholy little girl, who sucked her thumb perpetually, and kept her own counsel. (36)

Peter, who read to the girl often, only to please her beautiful mother, believed Mimsey acted like a tomboy (45); however, she and his cousin Madge—described as “pretty and light-hearted”—were appropriately terrified when Peter got in a fight, while simultaneously feeling charmed by his masculinity (54). This fight brought into light the prescribed gender roles of Victorian society even for children—the girls and women needing a male protector. Peter’s uncle, Colonel Ibbetson, noticing that Madame Seraskier wept for Peter’s departure, was also charmed by her intense physical beauty: “Gad! Who’s the lovely giantess that seems so fond of you, you little rascal, hey? By George you young Don Giovanni. I’d have given something to be in your place!” (66). In the six years Peter studied at his new English school, Madame Seraskier was never far from Peter’s thoughts, though her image was airbrushed slightly in Peter’s mind’s eye.

Much to the approval of other boys, Peter often drew sketches of her, making her eyelashes an inch long and her eyes three times the size of her mouth (72). As he created an idealized sketch of his feminine ideal, Peter realized he could draw her even more perfectly in his mind than she was in life, thereby admitting that even the most perfect female specimen was not truly perfect after all—his standards were impossible for even the most beautiful (72). Even she could be perfected only through the airbrushing he did with his pen.

Though they could never agree on much, one commonality shared by Peter and the Colonel is their love for beautiful, untouchable women. His uncle believes Leticia Elizabeth Landon and Felicia Hemans, well-known poetesses of the day, to be the standard of physical perfection to whom no one could compare (86). He coaches Peter on

the importance of marrying a “beautiful heiress with a title” (92). Greatly lacking in personal moral character, Colonel Ibbetson often lies about his conquests and ruins many virtuous women’s reputations. In discussions with Peter about making a good match, the Colonel mentions nothing beyond physical beauty and adequate finances. While at the ball, Peter notices that his uncle derives a sense of importance and power by whispering to the prettiest girl in attendance (97). This observation connotes to Peter the power of beauty and the power of having beauty in one’s possession, since a man in the Victorian era owned his wife as property. However, Colonel Ibbetson leads woman on viciously, particularly the widowed Mrs. Deane, damaging her reputation beyond repair by bragging about his alleged, but imaginary, “conquest” with her—which infuriates Peter. Peter also begins to pass judgment for himself, noting that Mr. Lintot’s wife was not the beauty he had described:

His paragon of a wife was by no means the beautiful person he had made her out to be, nor did anybody but he seem to think her so. She was a little older than himself; very large and massive, with stern but not irregular features, and a very high forehead; she had a slight tendency to baldness, and colorless hair that she wore in an austere curl on each side of her face, and a menacing little topknot on her occiput. (100)

Despite her physical imperfections, Peter does admit that Mrs. Lintot was “an excellent wife and devoted mother” who had always been gentle and compassionate toward him (101). She was virtuous, but not beautiful and thus could never compete in Peter’s mind as a model of female excellence. Peter continually finds himself drawn to beauty and all things he perceives to be beautiful. He frequents places that are likely to be filled with this beautiful image, either in art or in the flesh.



Figure 7: Peter worshipping a female sculpture (159).

Listening to music in Kensington Gardens feels enjoyable to Peter because he can watch “beautiful, well-dressed women, and hear their sweet, refined voices and happy laughter...” (117). He goes simply to watch them, mentally creating personal characteristics for them based on their appearance. Above, Figure 7 depicts Peter literally bowing down before a sculpture of his ideal woman. When he visits the National Gallery, he finds great splendor and attraction within the arts and remarks: “More physically beautiful people appeal to us all, whether they be in flesh or marble” (157). Though it must be noted that those of marble are specifically fashioned by their (usually male) creators—every inch of their smooth marble skin perfected by the sculptor’s tools.

Beyond that, these so-called physically beautiful people were always representative of the upper-class: Peter “pictured them as beneficent aristocracy seven feet high, with minds and manners to match their physique and set them above the rest of the world” (157). Because they are rich, Peter assumes those elite people must also be good, just, and kind and easily attributes those qualities to the wealthy, even though they may not be accurate. Simultaneously, Peter finds himself disgusted with those things that are not, in his grand opinion, beautiful and assumes the opposite about their character.

In describing the homeless, Peter calls them denizens: “One gazed with a dull, wondering pity at the poor, pale, rickety children; the slatternly, coarse women who never smiled (except when drunk); the dull, morose, miserable men. How they lacked the grace of French deformity, the ease and lightness of French depravity, the sympathetic distinction of French grotesqueness” (107). Beyond the fact that he was suspicious of nearly every uncertainty in life, like many Victorians during this era, Peter’s sense of pessimism changed him for the worse; he considered himself a hopeless failure (138).

This sense of failure could also stem from the fact that Peter remained a bachelor and on the outskirts of English society, always reminiscent of his life in France: “In those days, people were generally exclusive, an exclusiveness that was chiefly kept by the ladies” (139). Because the class lines were sternly drawn, Peter could not hope to mix within the kind of society these ideal women would frequent. Additionally, the image of Madame Seraskier’s image remained always within his mind’s eye—an airbrushed image that no real woman could match—until he visits the orchestra.

Just as the image of his mother had melted away and been replaced by Madame Seraskier, Madame Seraskier leaves his consciousness when he spies his next breathtaking ideal that causes him to reconsider his own powers of the imagination, an image from which he can never escape. He believes the Duchess of Towers “would be an ideal in [his] lonely life, to live up to in thought and word and deed” (174). He perceives that she is as virtuous as she is beautiful (175), but knows that their “inequality of social condition is a bar to any real intimacy” (177). Thus, because Peter believes he can never get close to the Duchess, he can affix traits onto her character as he so desires. Peter could not aspire to have her as his own because social standards negated this possibility. Still, he could bask in the wonder of her being—his perceived image of perfection—impossible to achieve by most women:

She was so tall that her eyes seemed almost on level with mine, but she moved with the alert lightness and grace of a small person. Her thick, heavy hair was of a dark coppery brown, her complexion clear and pale, her eyebrows and eyelashes black, her eyes a light bluish gray. Her nose was short and sharp, and rather tilted at the tip, and her red mouth large and very mobile and here; deviating from my preconceived idea, she showed me how tame a preconceived ideal can be. Her perfect head was small, and round her long, thick throat two slight creases went parallel, to make what French sculptors call *le collier de Venus*; the skin of her neck was like a white camellia, and slender and square-shouldered as she was, she did not show a bone. (172)

In Figure 8, the Duchess of Towers finds herself in the foreground of the illustration, a decision that emphasizes her height

even further; this image causes her to appear even more perfect. She

captures all eyes in the room,

especially Peter's. Peter believes that

even her laugh equals perfection,

describing her perfect teeth, her

eyelashes, and the facial expression



Figure 8: The Duchess of Towers enters a party (235).

that cut through him like a knife (172). Though he has not yet spoken to her, as far as he knows, he places her on the highest possible pedestal for him to admire.

Finally saving enough money, Peter joyfully returns to Paris and visits the Louvre, certainly a place of beautifully “airbrushed” paintings and sculpture. He witnesses his feminine ideal, the Duchess of Towers, looking upon the artistic feminine ideal *Lisa Giacomini*: “It seems I was fated to fall down and prostrate myself before the very tall, slender women with dark hair and lily skin and light angelic eyes” (223). Again, he does not speak to the goddess. That night, however, she visits his dreams. Instead of the usual nightmares that haunt him, the Duchess teaches Peter how to dream “real-ly” and dream of happy times. Based on her instruction, Peter can return—in his dreams—to happy childhood memories; he feels thankful to the woman who released him from his misery.

Later, he discovers the Duchess of Towers is none other than his old childhood playmate, Mimsey—now grown “into a splendid vision of female health” (237). Immediately, he berates himself for not recognizing her eyelashes (237). He appreciates the now “rich, modulated, and contralto [voice] with varied and delightful inflection” (241). Peter learns they have been experiencing shared dreams and he falls more in love with her than ever. She is socially adept, quick to make conversation, and kind (333). However, as she is truly a virtuous Victorian woman, she tells him that they can meet no longer within their dreams because of her responsibility and loyalty toward her husband, the Duke of Towers.

Shortly following this dream, Peter meets Mrs. Deane, now married, who shows him a letter in which Colonel Ibbetson, who had always been in love with Peter’s mother, claimed that Peter was his bastard child—as a result of his mother’s indiscretion. A scathing mad Peter, who could not bear to witness his mother’s good name tarnished, accosts his uncle and accidentally murders him. Because Peter refuses to reiterate the disparage that causes his upset, he gets sent to jail. There, he finds it interesting that, even in prison, the upper-class mingle with each other only while the others looked up to them; even the middle-class stuck “to their order” (183). Peter uses his solitude in jail to recollect the perfect woman’s face and visit her in his dreams: “He watches her depart, memorizing every detail of her tall, straight figure and blowing skirts” (210). Akin to Dante’s relationship to Beatrice in *The Divine Comedy*, even when Peter should feel a sense of impending doom, his focus rests on the image of his perfect woman—her perfect body and dress. However, again Peter’s beautiful Duchess saves him within his dreams, informing him that his sentence will be commuted and her husband has died. Thus,

though they cannot physically be together, they can now “dream true” together, forever. Not only has the Duchess taught him how to dream correctly, he now believes she has saved his life in the physical sense as well. Peter will be indebted to her forever.

In his dreams they are always together, she vows to never leave him: “[He] idolized her while she lived; [He] idolized her memory” (301). This opinion of her greatness was one shared by many, young and old, man and woman. Peter remarks that “a man feels bliss through the love of a devoted woman” (305). His mind wanders to think about the children they may have raised together, imagining them to be “even as beautiful and good as their mother” (336). Following one conversation, they realize they share a great-great grandmother who was said to have been “the tallest and handsomest woman in Anjou,” so their genetic destiny seems to have been predetermined (349). Their grandmother was intensely popular and also an excellent musician. Even as they grow older, the Duchess remains “beautiful, calm, and grand” in his mind (382). In one of his final dreams with her, the Duchess perishes saving another woman’s child at the train station, essentially killed into perfection and virtue in Peter’s dreams. Gilbert and Gubar would perhaps describe this phenomenon as “being killed into art.” Utilizing comments made by Virginia Woolf, Gilbert and Gubar believe women must kill the “aesthetic ideal” of themselves; Mimsey must take the same route to free herself from Peter’s mind. In his dream, in one of their last conversations, she calls herself his “loving, faithful, and devoted wife” (399)—as shown in the previous chapter, a Victorian woman’s greatest task was to get married, remain faithful and be devoted to her husband and children, always putting herself last—which Mimsey certainly did when giving her life to save a child that was not even her own. This virtue that Peter conceptualizes

certainly explicates an example of the feminine ideal, pronounced even further by Peter's various descriptions of her faultless beauty.

This chapter has worked to flesh out many of the stereotypes of Victorian society and images of women in *Peter Ibbetson*—largely impossible for most women, especially those of limited financial means and personal freedom, to attain. The perfect woman was always tall, larger than life really, and exceptionally, if not breathtakingly beautiful. Her figure was always perfect, her dress immaculate. The feminine ideal of perfection lived life on a larger scale, seemingly unattainable to most men. Her thick hair was always perfectly coiffed, her beautiful eyes and thick lashes wide and innocent. She was graceful, appearing to float rather than walk and above all, she was always virtuous, kind, chaste, submissive, and self-sacrificing. In this case, the Duchess of Towers was Peter's savior. She guided him not only through life, but protected him within his dreams—making him happy in a way that no woman in reality could.

Having to meet these ideals, this type of woman lived her life on a pedestal, a dangerous position that if she fell from—she could never find her way back. Beyond that, a pedestal is another way to immobilize women, to keep them in their place. Most Victorian women could never even begin to achieve this standard of perfection in life or in death—which explains why Peter “airbrushed” her with his pen. This woman was idealized and adored, but never really known—forced to construct herself carefully at all times. She could have no independent pursuits or personality beyond the realm of the home. She lived for her family and her children in a sphere of domesticity. Perhaps, this is why it was so much easier for these types of women to appear in the pages of novels,

drawn by pen and ink, or painted by the brushes of men, because this type of airbrushed perfection—a figment of a man's imagination—could not appear in reality.

Chapter Four: Impossible Feminine Perfection in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

Certainly examples of the impossible feminine ideal that Deems Taylor describes exist within the body of Du Maurier's work; however, feminine perfection also worked itself into the pages of other prominent late Victorian novels like those of Thomas Hardy, who satirized the impossible standard of womanhood by exaggerating the stereotype and calling attention to the inequalities of the laws towards women. This proclamation could begin with the book's title, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented* (1895) by Thomas Hardy. The title immediately suggests that regardless of the tale, the woman in question lives a good and virtuous life—that she was “more sinned against than sinning.” Hardy, with two male antagonists, provides contrasting male ideals of perfection through two men, Alec D'Urberville and Angel Clare. Though each man houses a different standard of perfection in his mind based on a differing set of values, Tess can sadly live up to neither as both ideals reach beyond her true persona.

In addition, just as in the case of the perfect images of Madame Seraskier and the Duchess of Towers that Peter created within his mind and drew with a pen and paper in *Peter Ibbetson*, Tess could not live up to the image of perfection Angel Clare drew within his mind. Though Angel committed similar indiscretions to Tess's, citing again the impossibility of meeting the standard of expectation for womanhood, Angel could not forgive Tess. As Thomas Hardy points out in the novel, claiming in reference to Angel Clare, “In considering what Tess was not, he forgot what she was, and forgot that the defective can be more than the entire” (265). Tess could never live up to Angel's perfect conception, although she spent the rest of her short life endeavoring to please him and become his ideal.

Before he has even met Tess, Angel attributes certain qualities to her character based on her beautiful face. Angel Clare first witnesses Tess, dressed in white with flowers in her hand, at the May Day dance—this image of purity and virginity will color every future interaction that he will have with her. Angel immediately considers her beauty and figure in comparison to the others: “Tess, a young member of the band turned her head at the exclamation. She was a fine and handsome girl—not handsomer than some others probably—but her mobile peony mouth and large innocent eyes added eloquence to colour and shape. She wore a red ribbon in her hair, and was the only one of the white company who could boast of such a pronounced adornment” (38). While many of the girls there possessed some notably pretty features, they were not anywhere near the whole picture of perfection: “The young girls formed, indeed, the majority of the band, and their heads of luxuriant hair reflected in the sunshine every tone of gold, and black, and brown. Some had beautiful eyes, others a beautiful nose, others a beautiful mouth and figure: few, if any, had all” (37). Beyond that, Angel’s brothers discourage him from approaching the girls because dancing “with a bunch of country hoydens” was not respectable (40). However, in regard to Tess, Angel noticed: “She was so modest, so expressive, she had looked so soft in her thin white gown...” (41). In fact, Tess’s beauty sparks most of her troubles.

When Tess goes to claim kin on the D’Urbervilles—which would make her family gentlefolk—her mother calls her face “her trump card” (73), describing her skin “as sumple [supple] as a duchess’s” (50). Alec D’Urberville immediately concedes that she is beautiful, referring to her often as “My Beauty” or “my pretty Coz” (61-63). He immediately notices her physical attributes, particularly her breasts just as Angel Clare

noticed at the May Day dance, which made her appear more mature than she truly was: “It was a luxuriance of aspect, a fullness of growth, which made her appear more of a woman than she really was. She had inherited the feature from her mother without the quality it denoted” (64). The more time Tess spends with Alec, the harder she must work to reject his advances. Tess shares this fear with her mother who pushes her toward Alec anyway against what should have been her better judgment, had wealth and a title for her family not been such a high priority. Tess’s mother believes Alec will marry Tess and turn her into a lady (68). Knowing Tess functions completely innocent of the ways of men and of sexuality, doing nothing to warn her daughter against his ill-intentions before Tess heads back to The Chase, she takes special care to make Tess even more becoming and play up the assets that she believed would help Tess secure Alec D’Urberville as her husband. Before Tess returns to the D’Urberville estate, her mother dresses her up in her finery:

First she fetched a great basin, and washed Tess’s hair with such thoroughness that when dried and brushed it looked twice as much as at other times. She tied it with a broader pink ribbon than usual. Then she put upon her the white frock that Tess had worn at the club-walking, the airy fullness of which, supplementing her enlarged coiffure, imparted to her developing figure an amplitude when she was not much more than a child. (70)

Alec responds to Tess’s beauty immediately, saying, “There was never before such a beautiful thing in Nature or Art as you look” (80). He is obsessed with her beauty and physically takes what he wants from her because she will not give it to him freely. Tess cries when he attempts to kiss her “holmberry lips” (75). Hardy, in true Victorian fashion, does not allow the reader to witness the scene occurring in the forest between the unmarried couple. Hardy sets up the scene and forces the reader to draw his or her own conclusions: When Alec returned, “[...]the moon had quite gone down, and partly on

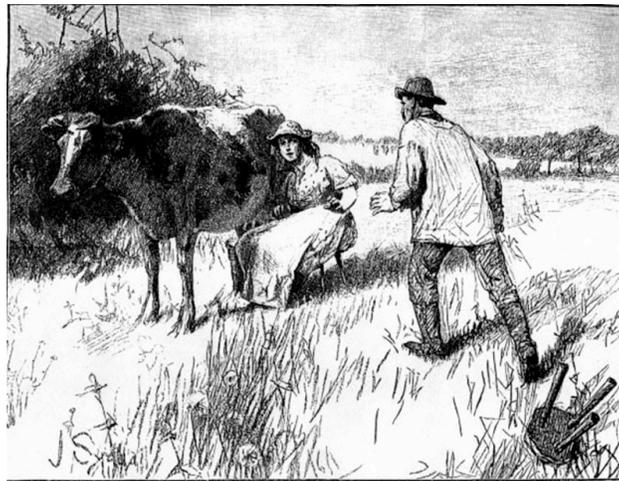
account of the fog The Chase was wrapped in thick darkness, although morning was not far off” (Hardy 94). Tess, with dried tears on her cheeks, sleeps there soundly. Alec leans so close he can feel Tess’ breath on his face (Hardy 95). Hardy leaves off there, allowing the reader to draw his or her own conclusions.

Following her rape, Tess returns home; her mother is upset she has not procured a proposal from Alec. Many people who live nearby suggest her fate was deserved because she was “the comeliest” (109). Tess never once places blame with the man who rapes her; she does not name him and takes all the punishment on herself and on her child, including being forced to perform her baby’s baptism on her own because of the baby’s unknown paternity. Hardy makes it clear within the text that Tess did nothing wrong and should be regarded as innocent, yet he does not protect her from the Victorian societal rules and standards within his plotline. He asserts that she misdirects the guilt she feels onto herself. Hardy claims, “But all the while she was making a distinction where there was no difference. Feeling herself in antagonism she was quite in accord. She had been made to break an acceptable social law, but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly” (105). Though poor Tess fell at the hands of Alec D’Urberville, Hardy made it evident that Tess was not responsible for her unfortunate circumstances, even though she ultimately ends up dead. Reed echoes this notion, believing that Hardy urged people to recognize that fallen women are not inherently evil people: “Hardy’s main purpose was to convey an authentic picture of the consequences of an unfortunate circumstance upon a fundamentally good and loving woman” (Reed 71). So certainly, the notion that a prostitute and a fallen woman could not be likened was widely accepted by the mass majority. Regardless of her innocence, the fault is placed

with Tess, and she quickly departs, only to become another man's standard of beauty and excellence.

Angel Clare's first observation of Tess is that she appears to be "a fresh and virginal daughter of Nature"—which is his ideal—an image that greatly differed from which Alec D'Urberville held of her (137). Tess impresses him greatly. He believes her to be "a visionary essence of woman..." and he nicknames her Artemis and Demeter, goddesses associated with chastity (146). She also speaks well: the education she received puts her ahead of most other women in her class. Her speech capabilities exceed those of her mother: While her mother spoke the dialect, Tess, who passed the "Sixth Standard in the National School

under a London-trained mistress, spoke two languages" (44). Thus, Tess speaks like someone in Angel's social class, and he reckons her worthy of his attention and time. He also gleans



the notion, from observing her, that their interests align

Figure 9: Syddall's *He Jumped Up From His Seat, and Went Quickly Towards the Desire of His Eyes* (1891).

enough for her to be a good wife. Figure 9 shows Angel progressing towards Tess, the desire of his eyes. He knows little of her, but she physically pleases him. Though he has barely spoken to her, he attributes these judgments he has made on her character, setting her up to be unable to meet those standards, but still endeavors to make her his own.

When Angel, though twenty-six and not requiring the permission of his parents by law, returns home to get his father's approval to marry Tess, he describes her as a perfect Victorian woman: He describes Tess as "a regular church-goer of simple faith, honest-hearted, receptive, graceful to a degree, chaste as a vestal, and, in personal appearance, exceptionally beautiful" (174). This description lends itself to the notion that Tess represents the ideal standard of womanhood. His mother, concerned with class-mixing, asks Angel if Tess can be called a lady (175). Angel, knowing their class differences may upset his parents and their social expectations, feels relief when he discovers that Tess can lay claim to the D'Urberville name, placing her societal status even above his own (202). He then refers to her as "Mistress Teresa D'Urberville," satisfied that she is everything he believes her to be, his standard ideal of womanhood. Then, he stops at nothing to claim her for himself.

When Tess accepts his marriage proposal, Angel hastens the marriage date to Christmas: "it is in every way desirable and convenient that I should carry you off then as my property" (209). The more quickly they marry, the more quickly he can

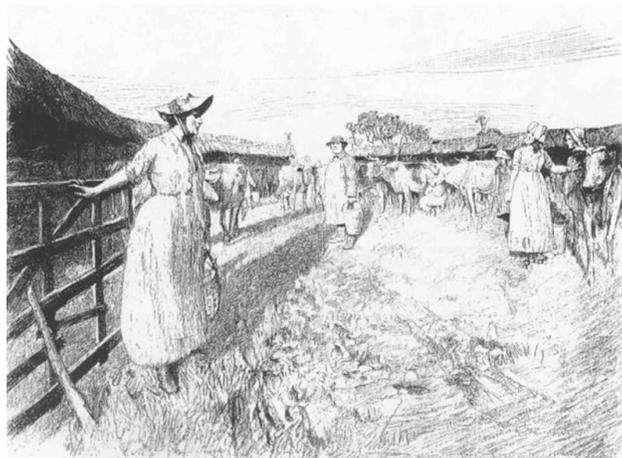


Figure 10: Syddall's *Tess in Dairyman Dick's Yard* (1891).

own her; after marriage, she belongs to him. Her status elevates at the dairy when the Cricks learn of her lineage: Mrs. Crick remembers Tess was "graceful and good-looking as she approached; but the superiority might have been a growth of the imagination aided

by subsequent knowledge” (210). In Figure 10 above, other workers seem to look upon her differently in light of her lineage. Once Mrs. Crick discovered that Tess was of a higher class than she originally believed, Tess becomes even more beautiful.

Simply because Tess came from a higher class, her beauty and grace elevate. Despite this, Angel does not yet know the degree of Tess’s loyalty towards him: “its single-mindedness, its meekness; what long-suffering it guaranteed, what honesty, what endurance, what good faith” (219). Based on all this construction of Tess’s character, she seems to be a model of feminine excellence—a model that can become even more perfect when Tess dresses the part. When the jewelry is delivered for Tess to wear following her wedding, she truly becomes the essence of beauty:

As everybody knows, fine feathers make fine birds; a peasant girl but very moderately prepossessing to the casual observer in her simple condition and attire, will bloom as an amazing beauty if clothed as a woman of fashion with the aids that Art can render; while the beauty of the midnight crush would often cut but a sorry figure if placed inside a field-woman’s wrapper upon a monotonous acreage of turnips on a dull day. (236)

Once Tess possesses the right frock, she transcends the class line to become “an amazing beauty” (226). In combination with every other description, Tess seems to be at the height of perfection—the woman created and crafted in the dreams of Angel Clare—his standard of feminine perfection and now his beautiful wife, his possession, his property. However, her honesty betrays her, and she falls from grace when she admits, that due to her past, she is not as he perceives her. Angel says, “You were one person, now you are another.” He says, “The Woman I have been loving is not you” (232). Though obviously the same person physically, morally Tess became someone he cannot accept—even though he still believes she is respectable. In one conversation, Tess destroys the image within his mind that she can never repair. When he no longer views her as virginal, he

can no longer adore her (238), though he feels unwilling to share this view with his mother, describing her still as pure and virtuous, almost reminiscent of a biblical verse from the tenth chapter of King Lemuel (recent scholars believe Hardy meant to reference King Solomon).

Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies. She riseth while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household. She girdeth her loins with strength and strengtheneth her arms. She perceiveth that her merchandise is good; her candle goeth not out by night. She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness. Her children arise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her. Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all. (263)

Not only does Tess supposedly have impeccable virtues, but she is breathtaking in appearance. Angel's mother recounts what Angel told her about Tess's physical appearance: "You said the other day that she was fine in figure; roundly built; had deep red lips like Cupid's bow; dark eyelashes and brows, an immense rope of hair like a ship's cable; and large eyes violey-bluey-blackish" (262). This description of Tess lends itself to comparison with Du Maurier's descriptions of Madame Seraskier and the Duchess of Towers. At this height of her perfection, Tess appears larger than life—everything Angel has wanted her to be, but in her fall from his image of perfection, he can love her no longer. Though Angel can admit Tess was "more sinned against than sinning" (235), his knowledge of her past sexual history causes her fall from the pedestal on which he so willingly and quickly placed her. However, the other man in her life still finds her bewitching.

When Tess again finds herself face to face with Alec D'Urberville, as depicted below in Figure 11, she learns that he still feels strongly towards her: "Tess—do not look at me so—I cannot stand your looks! There were never such eyes, surely, before Christianity or since" (311). Certainly, as evidenced in nearly every description of Madame Seraskier or the Duchess of Towers in *Peter Ibbetson*, Victorian men paid much attention to a woman's eyes in summation of the entirety of her physical beauty. Peter often mentioned that he could get lost in the eyes of his feminine ideals. However, in Alec's case, the same eyes that bewitch him, tempt him mercilessly: "You temptress, Tess; you dear damned witch of Babylon—I could not resist you as soon as I met you again" (316). This quotation suggests that Tess is somehow at fault, that somehow she should be held responsible for turning him into a "Wetlust"—someone obsessed with worldly goods and possessions (321). Alec believes Tess is at fault for his fall, though the opposite is true.

Though he blames her for the end of his preaching career, he acknowledges that she has done nothing,



Figure 11: Syddall's *Tess Stood Still, and Turned to Look Behind Her* (1891).

except "retain [her] pretty face and shapely figure" (322). Blaming an image a person has created in his own mind seems, at the very least, foolish, but each of these men does it

over and over again. Certainly Alec D'Urberville remains unable to resist the image of womanhood he finds so perfect. Like Alec, Angel cannot keep Tess from his thoughts either. When he returns to take her again as his wife, his conception of her beauty remains unchanged—she appears enchantingly beautiful:

Tess appeared on the threshold—not at all as he expected to see her—bewilderingly otherwise, indeed. Her great natural beauty was, if not heightened, rendered more obvious by her attire. She was loosely wrapped in a cashmere dressing-gown of gray-white, embroidered in half-mourning tints, and she wore slippers of the same hue. Her neck rose out of a frill of down, and her well-remembered cable of dark-brown hair was partially coiled up in a mass at the back of her head and partly hanging on her shoulder—the evident result of haste. (366)

However, despite what Alec D'Urberville had caused her to suffer physically and emotionally, there are no laws that can protect Tess. Society finds Tess guilty of murder, so she will be punished. Tess accepts her punishment with grace and civility, almost feeling relieved that she will no longer have to live with her own troubled, but truly pure, conscience. Tess begs Angel to promise to marry her sister Liza-lu, essentially an identical, except younger copy of her, also sharing her beauty. This suggests in some ways, that Tess is replaceable—that a similar version of her, “a spiritualized image of Tess, slighter than she, but with the same beautiful eyes,” can transpose itself into Angel’s standard of perfection.

In life, Tess was dutiful, obedient, and submissive, both to her parents and to her husband; she was everything a good Victorian woman should be, but it was never enough by society’s standards—Tess was not a caricature drawing found in the pages of *Punch* or *The Saturday Review*, or even the Bible, drawn in pen and ink by a man who created her as he wished. Tess was as real as she could be, forced to deal with the cards life gave her. Regardless of how either man in her life treated her, Tess never blamed those who caused

her downfall. Tess lived with all the blame and tragedy until she could live with it no longer. Instead of acting out, she spent her time trying to be the woman Angel wanted her to be, trying to never let down her family, and trying to act like a virtuous and good woman. Physically, Tess was unquestionably beautiful—a fact which caused her to deal with so much trouble in her short life. However, despite all of her good intentions, she could not ever have been good enough to live up to the image Angel Clare housed of her within his mind. He drew her there, much like Peter Ibbetson drew Madame Seraskier and the Duchess of Towers, impossibly perfect and good. In all cases, lives were wasted—hours upon hours spent either feeling upset that someone was not as perfect as they may have imagined or living with the images of perfection drawn within their mind's eye. In Angel's case, instead of realizing that he too had erred in judgment and forgiving the woman he loved—who had done everything she could possibly do to redirect his attention toward any of the other girls—he gave up, unsatisfied that she was not who he imagined her to be and punished her harshly for a crime committed against her, over which she had no control.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The Victorian woman, then, should stand impossibly tall, appear breathtakingly beautiful, be impeccably virtuous, and above all—sexually pure. Her dark, thick, cable-like hair should frame the wide and innocent eyes in her creamy white face. This model woman should forsake her own joy for that of her family. She should live to serve others, not free to pursue any of her own dreams or passions. In every breath she takes, she should endeavor to please her husband and her children. Essentially, this perfect woman is a caricature of a real human being, rendered in an artist's imagination. Wandering lost in a sea of a male dreams and imaginations, she will never find herself in reality. She comprises the impossible female standard set up for women by society; she is the standard to which no real woman can reach.

As evidenced in *Peter Ibbetson* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, a specific image of the model Victorian woman persisted throughout the late Victorian era, not only in literature, but also in poetry, paintings, cartoons, and all other types of art. This image of female perfection was largely unattainable to the majority of women. Even those who were nearly physically perfect and certainly virtuous were not good enough in the eyes of the men who desired them, but could not love them in spite of whatever minor faults the women possessed. In all cases, the men held the women to standards in their dreams and imaginations that living women found impossible to meet. Certainly, situations such as these are echoed today, more than one hundred years later.

Though Victorian women did not have access to the technology and medical advances of today's world, they still attempted to be perfect, just as women attempt to be today. Still, just as in Victorian times, only the wealthiest women can attempt even

approximate this state of physical feminine perfection. Like Victorian women, today's perfect woman also stands tall and waif-like. Like them, she also possesses some degree of wealth. The woman who can even begin to attempt to meet the ideal standard of feminine perfection enjoys the leisure time and financial means to spend hours at gym with a personal trainer, can afford to eat organic produce and can finance various cosmetic surgeries: breast augmentation, lip augmentation, nose jobs, botox, teeth whitening, laser hair removal, waxing, cellulite reduction, eye brow lifts, tummy tucks—all in a vain attempt to live up to the ideal woman as seen on television, in the movies, or in other media outlets.

According to Beecher, in his 1848 book on domesticity for young women, “As long as it is the fashion to admire, as models of elegance, the wasp-like figures which are presented at the rooms of the mantua makers....there will be hundreds of foolish women, who will risk their lives and health to secure some resemblance to these deformities of the human frame” (qtd. in Torrens 191). This assertion would hold true still today as women obsessively and relentlessly pursue perfection. According to Wilson, “The Victorians are still with us....The Victorians are still with us because the world they created is still here, though changed” (1). Though women today do not pursue the same avenues to achieve beauty as did Victorian women, avenues are still pursued, relentlessly.

These female subjects wander the streets with perfect hair, perfect nails, and pricey outfits, endeavoring to please the harsh and judgmental gaze of a hyper-critical society mesmerized with beauty and perfection. Yet sadly, even the most beautiful female specimens find themselves digitally airbrushed or digitally reconstructed to meet the most rigorous and impossibly attainable standards. Even more sad for women today, just as in

Victorian times, the social acceptance of these ideals allows them to be perpetuated.

Society as a whole subscribes to these ideals, despite their impossibility, and swallows them—internalizing these impossible standards without question.

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