

Social Rituals of Victorian England

Fine points of etiquette that are portrayed in Oscar Wilde's plays and other plays of the time mattered only to the leisured classes, for people who worked for a living did not pay calls and behave so formally. Although a great many books and guides were written at the time about correct behavior among the elite, these were read only by those who were rising in status, so that they would be less likely to make societal errors, or by those wanting a glimpse of the lives led by the very rich.

Victorian society, in the strictest sense of the word, was composed of fewer than 1,500 families drawn from the aristocracy and substantial gentry. People who were "in society" had country estates, and during the social season, they moved to a town house in a fashionable part of London.

The London season took place in May, June, and July, during which time members of society occupied themselves with shopping, paying calls, going to concerts and sporting events, and giving parties. By tradition, the season's most important social event was the opening of the May exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, when new works by the most contemporary painters were shown.

During the day, many of society's men were involved with meetings at the House of Lords, as the season also coincided with Parliament being in session. Social events provided an opportunity for cementing alliances, conducting political business, and promoting the interests of the elite.

Paying calls was the social recreation of upper-class women. Calls were short visits lasting fifteen to thirty minutes. Paying a call on someone new was a means of seeking further contacts, and returning calls signaled that an acquaintanceship could continue. The usual hour for paying calls was between 3:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. If a woman was busy or not in the mood for visiting, it was perfectly acceptable for her servant to tell callers she was "not at home," which simply meant that she was not receiving visitors – it was not considered an insult to the caller.

A lady never called on a man under any circumstances. It was considered improper and would likely result in scandal if discovered.

The central function of the social season was its role in making marriages. Private balls and parties were arranged so that young men and women of suitable backgrounds could meet. Before a girl could be considered eligible for marriage, she "came out" of the classroom and was introduced to fashionable society. Such formal entrance into society was marked by presentation at court when the girl was eighteen years old. Daughters of the aristocracy were automatically available. Other young ladies could be presented if their fathers were important country squires, members of the higher clergy, high-ranking military or naval officers, or substantial physicians or barristers. Daughters of wealthy manufacturers and merchants were presented only towards the end of the Victorian period.

Marriages were no longer “arranged” as they had been in earlier centuries, but mothers, grandmothers, and aunts put careful thought into introducing young people with compatible interests and comparable social standings. There was no dating – young people from respectable families did not go places together except in the company of other people.

People in the middle and upper classes were careful to use titles and family names when speaking to or about others in their own class. No one past the age of childhood used first names unless they were invited to do so, and schoolboys called each other by last name only. High-status men of the same social class usually continued to use surnames (or the landed name attached to their titles) among themselves throughout their lives, unless one man was much older than the other.

Older girls and young women addressed each other as “Miss” until they became close friends. Between single men and single women, first names were not used until a couple became engaged. Cousins, however, could use each others’ first names freely, regardless of age and sex.

The convention that a man asked permission from a woman’s father before proposing was required only if a large fortune was required. Otherwise, in both the elite and middle classes, the man proposed in person or by letter. After the woman accepted, he approached her father or guardian for a formal interview, during which time the father would inquire about the suitor’s prospects and establish how long it would be until the marriage would take place.

The social season ended when Parliament recessed – traditionally for the opening of grouse season on August 12. Unless one traveled abroad at that time, autumn was devoted to country sports at estates in various parts of the country. The ladies walked, talked, and amused one another while the gentlemen were out shooting or hunting.

The rest of the year, after the social season was over, most members of society lived separate lives in the country. However, some of the more active members of society spent time together during the off season as well, visiting for several days at a time at various country estates.

For more information:

<http://65.107.211.206/victorian/victov.html> - Links to a great many Victorian topics, including social history and theatre and popular entertainment.

<http://lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/~matsuoka/Victorian.html> - A resource for many Victorian websites.

<http://www.gober.net/victorian/reports/religion.html> - An article on the religious climate of Victorian England.

<http://www.britainexpress.com/London/victorian-london.htm> - Victorian London and its architecture.

<http://beta.loyno.edu/history/journal/1992-3/smith-r.htm> - An article on the temperance movement and class struggle of the period.