The Life of the Victorian Woman
Education and Opportunity

- Girls received less education than boys,
- were barred from universities, and
- could obtain only low-paid jobs.
- Middle-class girls received a basic education,
  given at home by a 'governess'.
  - untrained
  - taught the 3Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic
  - some history and a foreign language.
  - meager salary: half the amount which could be earned in a cotton mill.
- Women were unable to enter the professions (for example, medicine or law)
- excluded from public life and voting
- Most women had little choice but to marry.
- The role of the Victorian woman was neatly summed up by the Saturday Review which claimed that 'married life is a woman's profession'.

WHAT WAS THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN 1850?
by David Taylor from 'Mastering Economic and Social History', Macmillan 1988.
Women, far more than men, were regarded as possessions of their families.

Among the rich, family wealth automatically passed down the male line, and marriage handed her assets to her husband. Anything women owned, inherited and earned automatically belonged to their husband.

If an offense or felony was committed against a woman, only her husband could prosecute.

Under the terms of the marriage contract, a husband promised to support his wife in return for her promise to serve and obey him, this included personal rights to her body.

NOTE: Not until the late 20th century did women obtain the right to omit the “obey” promise from wedding vows.

Many men objected to wives working outside the home. It violated the marriage agreement. [Note that this agreement limited men as well, by making them single-handedly responsible for the economic support of the family.]

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Marriage, Law, and Property

• The children of the family were also the property of the husband.
• He could send the children to be raised elsewhere.
• Only in extremely rare cases could a woman obtain a divorce and, until 1891, if she ran away from an intolerable marriage, her husband could imprison her.
• Sanctioned by church, law, and custom.
• Adultery was not grounds for a woman to divorce a man; however, it was grounds for a man to divorce his wife.
• Life in a working-class family was desperately hard for the wife. She was expected to bear children, bring them up and go out to work. Families of seven or eight were commonplace. The working-class female would be most likely to enter domestic service, work as a factory-operative, or be an agricultural laborer.
Women’s Activities

- She spent her day in genteel pursuits
  - Embroidery
  - Knitting
  - Drawing
  - Reciting poetry
  - Playing musical instruments
  - Receiving guests
- Household chores would be done by servants.
Tight lacing in corsets, cumbersome multiple layers of skirts which dragged on the ground impeded women's freedom of movement. The cage crinoline (hoop skirt) became popular, replacing many layers of petticoats, but it was cumbersome and humiliating. Sitting down, the cage rode up embarrassingly at the front. The skirts were so wide that many women died engulfed in flames after the material caught fire from an open grate or candle.
A Wife’s Need

- Women were indoctrinated from birth to accept their lowly status, yet many did rebel.
- Some analyzed, criticized, and published books on women’s situation.
- Some earned institutionalization for their efforts.
- During the early to mid-nineteenth century the social order was being challenged
  - New philosophy was emerging – ideals of liberty, personal freedom, and legal reform.
  - Black slavery was being abolished.
  - Middle class men demanded the right to vote be given to them and not just to a few thousand landed gentry.
  - Women, too, began to work towards deserved emancipation from their enslaved status.

“Without ignoring accomplishments, or casting a slur upon any of the graces which serve to adorn society, we must look deeper for the acquirements which serve to form our ideal of a perfect woman. The companion of man should be able thoroughly to sympathize with him and her intellect should be as well developed as his. We do not believe in the mental inequality of the sexes; we believe that the man and the woman have each a work to do, for which they are specially qualified, and in which they are called to excel. Though the work is not the same, it is equally noble, and demands an equal exercise of capacity.”

-- Godey’s Ladys Book, Vol.LIII, July to December, 1956,Fashions,p92
LANGUAGE OF FLOWERS

- Flowers adorned almost everything... hair, clothing, jewelry, gowns, men’s lapels, home décor and china, and stationery.
- Flowers would convey messages of love or dislike depending upon which ones were given, their sizes how they were held, or also grouped together.
- A flower presented in an upright position represented a "positive thought; whereas one presented in the opposite direction had a negative meaning.
- A person could say "yes" by offering a flower with the right hand - the left hand "no.
- Dictionaries were written to explain this language to all.
FLOWER DICTIONARY

- AZALEA - Take Care, Temperance, Fragile, Passion, Chinese Symbols of Womanhood
- BABY'S BREATH - Innocence, Pure of Heart
- CACTUS - Endurance, My Heart Burns with Love
- CALLA LILY - Magnificent Beauty
- CARNATION (WHITE) - Sweet & Lovely, Innocence, Pure Love, Woman's Good Luck Gift
- CARNATION (SOLID COLOR) - Yes
- CARNATION (STRIPED) - No, Refusal, Sorry I can't be with you, Wish I could be with you.
- CARNATION (YELLOW) - Disappointment, Rejection
- CHERRY BLOSSOM (SINGLE) - Education

http://www.victorianbazaar.com/meanings.html
FLOWER DICTIONARY

- CLOVER (FOUR-LEAF) - Be Mine
- DAFFODIL (YELLOW) - Chivalry
- FERN - Magic, Fascination, Confidence, Shelter
- FOXTAIL GRASS - Sporting
- LILAC (PURPLE) - First emotions of love
- MAGNOLIA - Nobility, Perseverance
- OLIVE BRANCH - Peace
- ORCHID - Love, Beauty, Refinement, Chinese Symbol for Many Children, Thoughtfulness
- PETUNIA - Your Presence Soothes Me
- PINE - Hope, Pity
- TULIP (VARIEGATED) - Beautiful eyes
- WOLFBANE - Misanthropy, Chivalry, Knight
- WOODBINE - Fraternal Love
Those of the Victorian era liked to make up bouquets.

Tussie-Mussies were generally very well liked gifts. These were small bouquets of flowers wrapped in a lace doily and tied with satin.

The intrigue of secret messages sent this way, became a popular pastime.