

The Angel in the House

To cope with their difficult home life, the devoted Bronte sisters read their novels and their poems to one another at night—this is just one example of the siblings' mutual support and companionship. However, Victorian society did not encourage women to fulfill or express their creative talents (beyond the domestic arts). At the age of twenty Charlotte wrote to Robert Southey, the poet laureate, for his opinion about writing. His response shows the barriers facing women writers in that time: "Literature cannot be the business of a **woman's** life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her **proper** duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation."

Conventional wisdom held that men and women had separate "spheres" and duties, with woman's sphere being the house, family, and self-sacrifice. The popular image for the ideal woman was "the Angel in the House," who was expected to be devoted and submissive to her husband. The Angel was passive and powerless, meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious, and above all—pure. The phrase "Angel in the House" comes from the title of an immensely popular poem by Coventry Patmore (1854), who believed his wife Emily was the perfect Victorian wife, an ideal model for all women to emulate.

The following **excerpt** will give you a sense of the ideal woman and the Victorian male-female relationship presented by Patmore's poem:

*Man must be pleased; but him to please
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf
Of his condoled necessities
She casts her best, she flings herself.
How often flings for nought, and yokes
Her heart to an icicle or whim,
Whose each impatient word provokes
Another, not from her, but him;
While she, too gentle even to force
His penitence by kind replies,
Waits by, expecting his remorse,
With pardon in her pitying eyes;*

*And if he once, by shame oppress'd,
A comfortable word confers,
She leans and weeps against his breast,
And seems to think the sin was hers;
Or any eye to see her charms,
At any time, she's still his wife,
Dearly devoted to his arms;
She loves with love that cannot tire;
And when, ah woe, she loves alone,
Through passionate duty love springs higher,
As grass grows taller round a stone.*

Initially this ideal primarily expressed the values of the middle classes. However, Queen Victoria's devotion to her husband Prince Albert and to a domestic life encouraged the ideal to spread throughout nineteenth century society.

Given the Victorian view of women, it is not surprising that the sisters adopted pseudonyms to hide their sex when they published their poems and novels. They chose names which were not obviously masculine: Acton Bell (Anne Bronte), Currer Bell (Charlotte Bronte), and Ellis Bell (Emily Bronte).

Just as Emily Dickinson's life gave rise to the Myth of the Recluse, so the Brontes' home life gave rise to the Myth of the Lonely Geniuses and to stories which sentimentalized the three Bronte sisters and demonized their homelife. For instance, there is the story that their father, a minister, fired his gun in the house. Another story runs that while his wife, who had born six children in seven years, lay dying, he destroyed her only silk dress. Stories like these are now regarded as false.

Works Cited

"The Angel in the House." William Makepeace Thackeray. The City University of New York, 2 Mar. 2011. Web. 09 Jan. 2015.

"Jane Eyre." Charlotte Bronte. City University of New York, 29 Mar. 2005. Web. 08 Jan. 2015.