

Why were family values so important to the british middle class



Family values were so important to the middle class because as a class they wanted to be better than the other classes in society. It was the only thing that united them. In the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century it was a time of industrialisation. The middle class was establishing itself as a class of respectability, and making a living in the new industrial society. It developed into a class of prosperity that knew, unlike the upper class that it had worked for its living. As a result when middle class men came home from their work they wanted to relax, to be somewhere that was free from work.

This became the home and as a result a divide between the public and private sphere developed. Along with this divide others started to develop, the most important one was the new gender roles. There became a sharp divide in the roles of gender. Men were to be involved in the public sphere of society and women in the private. As a class the middle people in society embraced these new ideals. There was a revival in Evangelical religion at this time, which was also emphasising the new roles of gender divides. The middle class supported their campaign and before long the new ideas were part of every day life.

They included the idea that there was a very distinctive difference between men and women, this was both in their nature and physical appearance. Due to these differences they believed there should be a difference in the behaviour of the two sexes. Women were supposed to be domestic creatures with their place being in the home. They were to be protected from the public sphere, as they were naive and easily lead astray. In their new role

women were to be seen as wives and mothers living under the control of their husband or father.

They were supposed to behave morally and set examples to others. Part of this image was that they were not supposed to like sex and so not behave in provocative ways. Their role of women was to stay in the home and look after the children and to bring them up to be as moral as possible. Men on the other had been expected to be the breadwinners and to provide for his wife and children. All of these new ideas were known as family values and so became very important to the middle classes, as it was part of their new lifestyle in the new industrial society.

The middle class developed during the turbulent decades of the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century. This was a period of wars, trade cycles, near breakdown of the poor law and growing pressure from the growing wage labourers. (1) This brought the middle people of society together and so created a class. The middle class had many affinities with aristocracy and the gentry, The basis of their property and their value system and not least the nonconformity of many of their rank set them apart. These differences coalesced in the growing desire for independence from the clientage of landed wealth and power.

The middle class took pride in their business prowess. They believed in the importance new business practices and the benefits, which they could bring, specialisation, division of labour, new marketing techniques or introduction of new machinery. The middle class wanted to establish themselves as a separate class they did not like the upper class as they thought they were

lazy and corrupt and the working class they thought of as common drunks that had no morals. In the new businesses middle classes they were able to separate themselves.

At the same time though they needed an escape from the market, the home became this escape. A haven for those men to return to without the hassle of work. With this came the separation of public and private spheres. Before this new industrial society the wife of middle class men were expected to play their role in the business. At this stage all middle class businesses would often be the home as well. For example a grocer, the shop would be down stairs and the living space upstairs.

Women in this position were expected to work aside their husband e. g. n the shop counter, or during harvest. Sometimes the women ever had the sole responsibility for some crucial aspect of the business, like the account book in a merchant concern, or the dairy and the poultry yard in a farm or buying in raw materials for a manufacturing workshop. (2) This all changed at this period the women were to stay in the home and have a life of leisure while the men went out and earned the money. It actually became a sign of prosperity and respectability as it represented the fact that the family was making enough money that there was no need for an extra income.

Families moved into new quiet areas, in big houses often with domestic servants. All this was part of the new middle class and their idea of respectability and the proper way to act. Women that worked were considered unrespectable and immoral as they did not belong in the public sphere were they could easily be corrupted. The middle class found a voice

in the revival of Evangelicalism as it set the new ways that women should behave as being necessary for morality. Evangelicalism put its emphasis on a new lifestyle, a new ethic and a new framework for Victorian Bourgeoisie.

At the heart of this revival was the Clapham Sect, they became the leaders of the Evangelicals. Its origins lay with Henry Thornton's house of Clapham and his ideas. The Thornton family was prosperous bankers. Clapham became the centre for a number of families who were united in interest and interconnected by marriage. The major figures included Henry Thornton, William Wilberforce, Zachary Macaulay and Lord Teignmouth. The Sect's work was primarily devoted to furtherance of Evangelical principles in political and social fields.

They were best known for their effort in abolition of the slave trade and slavery. The Sect's second campaign was to attempt to transform national morality and in doing so redefine cultural norms and encourage new seriousness and respectability in life. They did this by pamphlets, manuals, sermons and as many other media as they could utilise. The Sect believed that religion should be part of daily life as a rule. After 1820 Evangelicalism increasingly established itself as part of dominant culture. (3) From this developed the idea that men and women were completely different from one another.

This not only included their physical difference, but women were thought to have smaller brains than men did and were incapable of using them. Women were thought to be delicate, naive and easily lead astray. Whereas men were big and strong and there to look after females and kept them away

from danger. Women did not exist as individuals any more, they were either wives or mothers. Along with this goes the idea that women were to lack sexual desire, and be passionless. Passionless became associated with morality and were brought together in the enhanced prestige of motherhood, it was the epitome of femininity.

Men also experienced a change here because women were supposed to be passionless, sex was only supposed to be for reproduction, not recreation. It became widely believed that the male body was endowed with a fixed quantity of sperm and that too much indulgence would either cause impotence or drain energy from other functions of body or mind. (5) Men who disregarded this moderation carried great guilt and anxiety. As women were now expected to stay in the private sphere they were expected to act as moral regenerators of the nation. They were important in the struggle to reform and revive the nation.

They were expected to set a good example at all times, to men and improve manners by example to all those around them. Women were also expected to be philanthropic, they had the means to do this as they had a leisurely life, they were acquainted with domestic wants and were more sympathetic to female complaints. This philanthropic nature was to be used in charity. Charity was to be part of the female daily life, they were expected to help those that were not as moral as them. It was a reflection of their virtue and a relief from a life bound by the home. (6) Women's major role in the home was the upbringing of her children.

She was expected to bring them up properly and to the standards of the middle class. They were seen as educators to their children. For both male and female children the mother had to teach them manners and how to behave respectably. The females however received a different education that involved training the girl to be a good wife and mother. In doing so prepare them for the new sphere they would enter after they marry. (7) In conclusion family values were so important to the British middle class as they were part of the new code of behaviour in the new industrial societies.

Before the middle class had small businesses that they run with their wives and lived, the majority of the time, in the same place of the business. When the middle class started to develop their businesses and become more prosperous the family home was moved away into a separate sphere. So there arose a divide between the public and the private sectors of society. This also caused a change in the ideas of the people and the way the behaved. There became set role for both male and females, which had to be followed if you wanted to be considered respectable at that time.