8: Family Values

A. Unhappy Families

1. Class title 1 (The Family of Queen Victoria)

The subject today is **Morality**. It is closely related to **Religion**, but not contained in it; there is secular morality too. In the first hour, we shall look at both, and also consider the question of why such things are expressed so differently in the arts of Britain and America.

Wikipedia puts this portrait, *The Royal Family* (1846, Royal Collection) by **Franz Xavier Winterhalter** (1805–73), right at the top of its article on **Victorian Morality**, since the Queen, Prince Albert, and their children were held up as the ideal of a perfect family. When we talk about "the Victorian Age," we are often talking as much about moral values as industrial progress or the expanding Empire. Nowadays, we tend to give "Victorian Morality" a negative connotation, but Britons at the time did tend to model themselves upon what they imagined the Queen represented. **[cue slide]** And Victorian art shows plenty of examples of families that were *not* so happy. Here's one…

2. Section title A (Winterhalter to Egg transform)
3. Egg: *Past and Present 1* (1858, Tate)

That Unhappy Family picture was one of the earliest: it's *Past and Present, Number One* (1858, Tate) by **Augustus Egg** (1816–63). It is part of a triptych, but we can confine ourselves to this one for the moment. What is the setting? Who are the people? What is going on? Clearly, this is a well-to-do middle-class family in their home. The father has just come in (hat on the table), and has a letter in his hand. The mother is prostrate on the floor at his feet.

4. Egg: *Past and Present 1* (1858, Tate), detail with symbols

It is her body language that most clearly shows what is going on. She is literally the **Fallen Woman** of Victorian censure. Her husband has returned home with evidence of her adultery, and she knows she will be thrown out through that door we see in the mirror. And if this was not enough, look at all the **symbols** that the artist has crammed in!

5. **COMPARISON 1:** Egg: *Past and Present*, all three pictures together
6. — bedroom
7. — docks
8. — living room

The picture was part of a triptych, as I said, and the three pictures together were hung as shown, though without the overlaps. Although the title *Past and Present* was not used by the artist, the two side paintings do seem to show a later time than the central one and, because both feature the same moon

in the same sky, perhaps the same time as each other. Can you work out what each represents? And—a more difficult question—where is the viewer's sympathy expected to lie?

9. Watts: *Drowned* (1859, Watts Gallery, Compton, Surrey)

What would happen to an abandoned woman like that? I don't know if it was in answer to the Egg painting, but the next year **George Frederick Watts** (1817–1904) painted *Drowned,* showing one possible fate, and probably the statistically most likely one: suicide. Is there any ambigity about our response here? Pity, surely, not condemnation. It is probable that both this and the Egg picture plus several others were inspired by the poem *The Bridge of Sighs* written in 1844 by **Thomas Hood** (1799–1845), who writes with great sympathy. Here it is in its entirety, read by **Jonathan Jones**, who is fast becoming my favorite reader of Victorian verse.

10. Hood: *The Bridge of Sighs* (read by Jonathan Jones)
11. — last two stanzas of the above

I won't say the poem is a masterpiece; look at the rhyme in: *"Still, for all slips of hers,* / *One of Eve's family—* / *Wipe those poor lips of hers* / *Oozing so clammily*." Yet the end result, rather as with **Dickens**, is quite moving. Here are the last two stanzas, which might be worth closer analysis. To what or whom does "contumely, cold inhumanity, burning insanity" refer? Is there a switch of tone at "her evil behaviour"? And would the poem be more or less effective without the last four lines?

12. Hunt: *Awakening Conscience* (1853, Tate), with *Light of the World* (1854, Keble Coll)

The Hood is essentially a secular poem, but it has a religious twist. Here is a similar comparison of secular values with religious ones. On the right, *The Light of the World* (1894) by **William Holman Hunt** (1827–1910). My parents put a print of it in my bedroom, because its message of "opening one's heart to Jesus" was central to their Evangelical Christianity. However, while working on this picture, Hunt decided to paint a secular picture in the same format, *The Awakening Conscience*.

13. Hunt: *The Awakening Conscience* (1853, Tate), with details

And how secular it is! It shows a rich man with his mistress in the love-nest he has rented for their assignations. Hunt even rented a room in a **house of convenience** himself so he could get the details right. The young woman is having second thoughts; are these too late? Like Augustus Egg, Hunt crams his painting with details: the cat with the dead bird, the tangled skein of wool, the discarded glove, the music of "Tears, idle tears." Only the patch of sunlight at her feet suggests that redemption might be possible, but most of Hunt's viewers would have thought the opposite. The influential critic **John Ruskin**, for example, wrote: "*the very hem of the poor girl's dress, at which the painter has laboured so closely, thread by thread, has story in it, if we think how soon its pure whiteness may be soiled with dust and rain, her outcast feet failing in the street*." Well, that is him reading his own predictions into it; Hunt does not say, one way or the other.

14. **COMPARISON 2:** Two Daughters
15. Redgrave: *The Outcast* (1851, Royal Academy)
16. Collier: *The Prodigal Daughter* (1903, Lincoln)

Here is another comparison, although the bottom picture was painted half a century before the upper one; I'm sorry I don't have better reproductions. Anyway, what is going on in each? The earlier picture, *The Outcast* (1831) by **Richard Redgrave** (1804–88), is rather melodramatic, and I don't imagine we have much more to say about it. But the other, *The Prodigal Daughter* (1903) by **John Collier** (1850–1934), is quite enigmatic. What do you make of the daughter's clothing, especially in contrast to the surroundings? What is the attitude of her parents? And most intriguing of all, what is *her* attitude? In 1903, the Victorian era was over. Is this the New Woman, proud of her freedoms? Clearly, she has had some success—but how has she obtained it, and in what profession?

17. Hardy and *Tess of the Durbervilles*

Let's end this section with a somewhat ambivalent poem by **Thomas Hardy** (1840–1928) called *The Ruined Maid*. I'll be looking at his *Tess of the Durbervilles* (1891) in the second hour, which really *is* about a ruined maid, and a tragedy—but this, which he wrote in 1866 but did not publish until 1901, takes a very different attitude. See what you think. [The photo, incidentally, is from an acted-out performance on YouTube; I've put that version on the website too.]

18. Hardy: *The Ruined Maid*

B. Town and Country

19. Section title B (*The New Bonnet*, untitled)

What would you make of this picture? English or American? What is its moral? I think you might tell the nationality from the houses seen through the open door and the comparative simplicity of the setting and clothing of the older people. The basic moral is clear: thrift versus vanity. But the Met's website notes the bottle and glass by the man and the mirror behind the older woman as evidence that there might also be an implication of hypocrisy. It is called *The New Bonnet* and it was painted in New York by **Francis William Edmonds** (1806–63).

20. Francis William Edmonds : *The New Bonnet* (1858, NY Met), with title

This is an exception to my statement on the original website that I was unable to find *any* American paintings comparable to the Victorian moralities we have seen. But it is one of the very few that are urban; generally mid-century American artists express their morality in a *rural* key, hence my title *Country* Cousins. Nineteenth-century America was overshadowed by one huge moral issue—SLAVERY—and the concerns that occupied middle-class Victorians must have seemed petty in comparison. Besides, as we saw last week, the adherence to strict codes of morality and manners became the badge of

membership in the upper middle classes; it was the shield they carried with them into the outposts of Empire. Americans saw themselves in more fundamental ways.

21. **COMPARISON 4:** Country Chores
22. Eastman Johnson: *The Corn Husking* (1860, Syracuse)
23. Frank Blackwell Mayer: *Leisure and Labor* (1858, Washington NGA), untitled

Another comparison. Both paintings date from just before the Civil War, and both have rustic settings. At the top is another painting by Eastman Johnson, called *The Corn Husking*. The lower one is by the Baltimore artist **Frank Blackwell Mayer** (1827–99); I'll give you its title in a moment. But first a question: does either picture convey a moral? I'm not sure that the Johnson does, but if anything it would be that sharing common chores is what keeps a family together. A Victorian painter, I think, would have made more of the fact that the young woman has paused in the work to chat with her beau, but Johnson does not seem to imply any criticism. The Mayer picture is a different matter; can anybody suggest a title?

24. — the same, with title

It is in fact *Leisure and Labor*, contrasting the industry of the blacksmith with the idleness of the dandy looking on. But the National Gallery website suggests that it may have a further agenda, specific to its date just before the Civil War, as a contrast between North and South.

25. Frank Blackwell Mayer: *Independence / Squire Jack Porter* (1858, Smithsonian)
26. — the same, with title

Here is another Frank Blackwell Mayer that I will also leave untitled for the moment. What do you think it is: a portrait, a genre picture, or some kind of morality? It is in fact a portrait of a Pennsylvania man known as **Squire Jack Porter**, who made considerable wealth from coal mining. But the artist and sitter have chosen not to flaunt that. He is shown in an ultra-relaxed pose in very simple rural surroundings; its principal title is *Independence.* You might say that Squire Jack is the epitome of the Franklinian ideal: the self-made man who lives frugally.

C. Shaping American Beliefs

27. Moody and Sankey

These are the evangelists **Dwight L. Moody** (1837–99) and **Ira D. Sankey** (1840–1908). Although American, they had their first big success conducting revival meetings in Britain, most notably in Scotland, in the early 1870s—a success that they subsequently repeated in tours of America. I'll come back to them in a moment. But first I want to look at a more surprising champion of moral values.

28. Section title C (Moody & Sankey / McGuffey transform)
29. William Holmes McGuffey
30. Jess McHugh: *AmeriCanon*

This is **William Holmes McGuffey** (1800–73), compiler of the phenomenally successful *McGuffey Readers*. Once again, I was awakened to the cultural importance of this series by **Jess McHugh's** fascination book *AmeriCanon,* which I have mentioned before. Two things are interesting here: the unexpected success of McGuffey's original intent, and the changes that were made to the books when they were reissued in a new edition 40 years later. McGuffey was a Presbyterian minister—but also an educator. He ended his life as a college president, but he began in his teens as an elementary school teacher on the Ohio frontier, where the only book he could expect his charges to bring to school was their Bible, so he taught them to read from that. In 1835, his friend **Harriet Beecher Stowe** recommended him to a Cincinnati publisher to write a series of readers for school use, and he wrote texts that conveyed the same kind of moral lessons. The *Eclectic Readers*, six in all, sold at rates second only to the Bible and Webster's Dictionary. **Henry Ford** was one of the children brought up on them; he later started a collection of all the different editions, and the Henry Ford Museum produced this video; it is not all as annoying as the beginning!

31. McGuffey Readers (Henry Ford Museum)
32. **COMPARISON 5:** page from the *First Reader*
33. — page from the *Second Reader*

Here is a page from the *First Reader*; let's compare it to a similar page from the *Second Reader*. You will immediately notice the difference in reading level. But you will also see that while both clearly have a moral purpose, the second story is explicitly Biblical. As a minister, McGuffey brought in Biblical teaching whenever the language level permitted it.

34. Wikipedia on the Revised Edition

In 1879, however, the publishers brought out a new edition, which is the one more generally seen today. Here is the Wikipedia paragraph about the changes. And here is something else I discovered: the *Readers* are still widely used today in the Christian homeschooling community. And while both are good, the preference is to use the earlier edition, because it is more scriptural. Here is a homeschool mother explaining the difference. But note: she gets confused, and says 1978 when she means 1879, and once the newer version when she means the older one. However, if you get it into your head that she intends the *first* version of 1836 whenever she is talking about Christian values, it will make sense.

35. McGuffey Readers, differences between editions
36. De Tocqueville on religion

McGuffey's first *Readers* are almost exactly contemporary with the first volume of *Democracy in America* (1835) by **Alexis de Tocqueville** (1805–59). As you see, he explicitly links morality to religion—by which he means Christianity—but he refrains from specifying which branch of Christianity. In 1831, when he visited, you could still say that America was predominantly a Protestant Christian country. By 1879, that situation had become more complex, and it is infinitely more complex today. But Tocqueville makes another point that I think *is* still true today: that religion is commingled with patriotism.

37. Some characteristics of civil religion

As a foreigner, it has always surprised me that a country whose constitution specifically forbids the establishment of any religion should have the motto "In God we trust" emblazoned on its currency. But my research for this class has introduced me to a new concept: the idea of **Civil Religion**. It involves the invocation of God in a non-sectarian sense, plus a variety of other observances that are religious in form though secular in content. When I see it in this light, the situation of religion in America becomes a lot easier to understand. For many Americans, it seems to me, being American *is* a religion. Since it says nothing about establishing any given denomination, the motto "In God we trust" does not contravene the First Amendment—even though many people take it as endorsing *their* religion. A 2022 **Pew Survey** revealed that 73% of American adults believe that government and religion should indeed be kept separate, 50% nonetheless believe that laws should reflect Biblical teachings. The power of American Civil Religion also explains why the song "God Bless America," written in 1918 by **Irving Berlin** (1888–1989), should have beeh hailed as almost an alternative national anthem. Here he is singing it on the **Ed Sullivan Show** in 1968.

38. Irving Berlin sings "God bless America"
39. Moody and Sankey (repeat)
40. Aimee Semple McPherson and Billy Graham

But Civil Religion in America, as we know, runs more or less in parallel with Evangelical Christianity. So we are back to **Moody and Sankey**. Moody, who had no formal theological training, nonetheless became a charismatic preacher. Sankey was a hymn writer, composer, and singer, who joined Moody as an Evangelist in song. With Sankey beside him, Moody became one of the first of what seems to have become an American tradition of mass Revivalists. Another was **Aimee Semple McPherson** (1890–1944) who used broadcast media to such effect between the Wars, or **Billy Graham** (1918–2018) who conducted Revivals in America, Britain, and elsewhere in the 1950s and 1960s. My parents took me to one such Billy Graham meeting in a vast stadium in London as a child; it was very impressive.

41. Bliss and Sankey: *Gospel Hymns*

Ministry in song required the use of hymns that would convey the Christian message in ways that were easy to understand and catchy to sing. *Gospel Hymns,* the collection of hymns by Sankey and others that the Moody organization put out in 1876, became the best selling hymnal of all time until well into the twentieth century.

42. Robert Lowry: *Shall we gather at the river?*

Many of them have almost reached the status of folk songs, for example the tune "Shall we gather at the River?", written in this case by **Robert Lowry** (1826–99). I'm sure you know it. It occurs to me that part of the reason for its success is not only its tune but also the idea that there is a better land out there awaiting us after death. It might be a surprising thing to say about a white evangelical hymn, but this is exactly the same thought as pervades many of the best-loved negro Spirituals, such as *Deep River* and *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.* In selecting a video to end this first hour, I looked through about half a

dozen choirs and arrangements. But I plumped in the end for this compilation somebody made of eight clips from Westerns by director **John Ford** (1894–1973) in which he has used this hymn, on the sound-track or sung, well, badly, or in fragments. It is a testament to the point that I have been making, that religion in America morphs almost indistinguishably into the secular culture.

43. John Ford: film clips using *Shall we gather at the river?*
44. Robert Lowry: *Shall we gather at the river?*

D. Morality in Fiction

45. Section title D (covers of the five books discussed below)

The paucity of moralizing subjects in American *painting* is compensated by their frequency in American *novels.* Victorian novels in Britain are notable for their moral concerns also. So there is no way that I can claim that my selection of titles from the last half of the century is representative, let alone exhaustive. I made a list of ten authors and twenty works; the final selection was largely a matter of finding good videos that offered sufficient variety.

46. Hawthorne: *The Scarlet Letter*, cover

My earliest is *The Scarlet Letter,* published by **Nathaniel Hawthorne** (1804–64) in 1850, the classic Fallen Woman in fiction. Set in early colonial New England, its protagonist is **Hester Prynne**, a young woman who has borne a child out of wedlock. She is actually married, but her husband has been presumed lost at sea several years before. Although forced to endure public shame on the scaffold and wear the scarlet letter **A** for the rest of her life, she refuses to name the father of her baby girl, whom she calls **Pearl**. We later learn that this is the **Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale**, a fiery and respected young preacher. Hester's husband, who is not dead, returns under a new name, **Roger Chillingworth**, and vows to track down the adulterer, but the real pressure on Dimmesdale comes from his own conscience. Near the end of the book, he is chosen to preach a sermon to honor the new Governor of the colony. But tormented by guilt, he loses his thread, staggers out of the church, and ascends the very scaffold on which Hester had been shamed. This PBS production from 1979 features **John Heard** as Dimmesdale.

47. Hawthorne: *The Scarlet Letter*, Dimmesdale's confession
48. Eliot: *Silas Marner*, cover

George Eliot was the pen name of **Mary Ann Evans** (1819–80). She has some claim to be considered the greatest British moral novelist of the century; her masterpiece, *Middlemarch* (1872), is quite simply incomparable. *Silas Marner, the Weaver of Ravensloe*, is an earlier work (1861), but it is much more compact, and gives us a simpler moral dilemma. Disappointed in love as a young man, **Silas** moves to a village where he is unknown, turns in upon himself, and becomes a miser, accumulating gold which he stores in his isolated house. When that gold is stolen, his misanthropy only intensifies. His salvation begins with his discovery of an abandoned baby girl, whom he calls **Eppie** and brings up as his own. He

sees her golden locks as a symbolic return of his lost gold. Years later, when his real gold is discovered and returned to him, he receives a visit from **Squire Godfrey Cass**, who turns out to be Eppie's real father—his first wife, whom he married on an impulse he immediately regretted, died in childbirth, and he has concealed the marriage so he could marry again. Now he comes with his wife **Nancy**, who is barren, with the intention of claiming Eppie and bringing her up as a lady. **Ben Kingsley** is Silas, **Patsy Kensit** Eppie and **Patrick Ryecroft** and **Jenny Agutter** play the Cass couple.

49. Eliot: *Silas Marner,* Squire and Mrs Cass come for Eppy
50. Twain: *Huckleberry Finn*, cover

Had I been featuring the earlier novel *Tom Sawyer* (1876) by **Mark Twain** (Samuel Langhorne Clemens, 1835–1910), I might have included it in my section on moral education for children, for although completely different in tone from the *McGuffey Readers*, it was also written for young people. **Huckleberry Finn**, its sequel from 1884, features a young hero (Tom's friend in the earlier book) and is also a picaresque novel or *Bildungsroman.* But Huck now is older than Tom was then, and his issues are altogether more mature. For example, in the scene I am about to show, Huck has escaped from his abusive father and joined up with **Jim**, a black slave who has run away from **Miss Watson**, one of Huck's guardians. They are floating down the Mississippi on a raft. Huck has befriended Jim, but worries about his moral position in doing so.

51. Twain: *Huckleberry Finn*, excerpt from Chapter XVI

Tom's scruples are put aside, however, when a group of bounty-hunters try to board his raft. The actors in the film are **Jeff East** and **Paul Winfield**.

52. Twain: *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck and the bounty hunters
53. Hardy: *Tess of the d'Uurbervilles*, cover

We have already heard **Thomas Hardy's** comic take on the Fallen Woman in his poem *The Ruined Maid.* His 1891 novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles,* arguably his masterpiece, is emphatically a tragedy, but it also questions Victorian mores through its subtitle, *A Pure Woman*. Early in the book, **Tess Durbeyfield**, who is working as a farmhand, is seduced—or more likely raped—by **Alec d'Urberville**, possibly a distant cousin. She has a sickly son who soon dies and Alec abandons her. Years later, she is courted by a young gentleman farmer, **Angel Clare**. At first refusing him because of her past, she ultimately accepts, but he brushes off her attempts to tell him the truth until they are married and he has a dalliance of his own to confess. **Gemma Arterton** is Tess with **Eddie Redmayne** as Angel.

54. Hardy: *Tess of the d'Uurbervilles*, the confessions
55. Hardy: *Tess of the d'Uurbervilles*, Stonehenge scene

It is the old double standard. Although his own fault was much greater, Angel leaves Tess and goes to make a living as a farmer in Brazil. Time passes again. Angel's farming venture has failed and he returns to make it up with Tess, it is too late; he finds her living under a false name as the mistress of Alec d'Urberville. Tess, who still loves Angel, is torn. When Alec continues to abuse her, she murders him in his bed and joins Angel for a few days of stolen happiness. The police manhunt finally catches up with

her on **Stonehenge** at dawn, and she accepts her fate. At another dawn some days later, Angel and Tess's younger sister are on a hillside looking down at the prison where Tess is to be executed. I count the last two paragraphs of the novel as some of the most nihilistic in all literature.

56. Hardy: *Tess of the d'Uurbervilles*, closing paragraphs
57. Melville: *Billy Budd,* book cover

So far, I have had two American novels and two British ones. My last example, *Billy Budd,* covers both bases since, although written by an American, **Herman Melville** (1819–91), it is set on a British man-o-war on which the title character, a captured American seaman, has been impressed. Melville subtitles this book, which was published posthumously, "an inside narrative," meaning that what interested him was what went on *inside* each of his main characters, especially on the psychological and moral plane.

58. Melville: *Billy Budd,* excerpt from Chapter 12

One of these characters is as close to a study in pure Evil as you are likely to get in a novel written before our own times. This is the Master-at-Arms **John Claggart**, clearly an intelligent man trapped in some psychic prison of his own making. Billy Budd is everything that he is not: young, blonde, open-hearted, and entirely innocent. For Claggart, his very presence is an existential challenge; Billy must be destroyed. He does this by getting one of his minions to fake evidence to frame Billy on a charge of sedition. The Captain, who has become fond of Billy (homosexual implications lie half-buried throughout the story), asks the boy to speak for himself, but the lad has a stress-induced stammer and can't get the words out. I am going to show this scene in the 1962 film directed by **Peter Ustinov**, who plays the Captain; **Robert Ryan** is Claggart and **Terence Stamp** is Billy. But a film cannot break away from the action to give us Melville's "inside narrative"; the character has to be built up over time; so this scene, good though it is, may seem to lack a dimension.

59. Melville: *Billy Budd*, Billy kills Claggart
60. Class title 3 (scene from the Britten opera)

My final image is a scene from the Benjamin Britten opera of the same title.