

CHAPTER I

House and home: the parlour in context

The Victorian parlour is a distinctive artifact that will richly repay a thoughtful interdisciplinary analysis. The parlour was, like Shakespeare's Globe, a little world. Within this space, the men, women, and children of the British middle classes acted out the dramas of domestic life. Just as the "Wooden O" of the Elizabethan stage was profoundly influential in the development of Shakespearean drama, so these domestic settings were of critical importance in shaping Victorian experience, delimiting the horizons of character, and constituting the particular visual, spatial, and sensory embodiments of human culture at a particular historical moment. The parlour was of considerable interest to the Victorians themselves, and it appears in Victorian genre painting and fiction as a newly significant space. The nascent world of advertising and mass marketing was quick to recognize and capitalize on the widespread desire to create this kind of space within the middle-class home. The parlour was also a site whose distinctive features were the subject of serious aesthetic debates. It will be my contention that the parlour, whether in life or in art, is a site at which we can explore potentially explosive disturbances in psychic and social fields and can trace attempts both to articulate and resolve such disturbances. Ultimately, I mean to investigate how ideology is inscribed in and onto the material world and how this world resonates with meaning for historical subjects.

Throughout the Victorian era, cultural authorities spoke decisively and at length about both the practical and the moral dimensions of domestic life: books and articles on what we would now call interior decoration began to proliferate about mid-century, and constitute a valuable resource for Victorian cultural studies.¹ In 1878, in a series entitled "Art at Home" edited by W. J. Loftie, Lucy Orrinsmith published a book entitled *The Drawing-Room: its Decorations and Furniture*. Her text is a useful starting point for a study of the

parlour, in part because it compels us to recognize that there is no unmediated access to this space available to us: all representations of the parlour – whether graphic or linguistic – are partisan, strategic, and embedded in history.

In introducing her ideas about how to produce a felicitous parlour, Mrs. Orrinsmith asks, “Who does not call to mind the ordinary lower middle-class drawing-room of the Victorian era?” In case her reader does not, she goes on to recreate a vision of this “very head-quarters of the commonplace”:

All things seem as if chosen on the principle of unfitness for the fulfillment of any function; everything is in pairs that possibly can be paired. The cold, hard, unfeeling white marble mantelpiece, surmounted by the inevitable mirror, varying in size only with the means of the householder, totally irrespective of any relation to the shape or proportions of the apartment; the fireplace a marvellous exhibition of the power of iron and blacklead to give discomfort to the eye. At the windows hard curtains hang in harshest folds, trimmed with rattling fringes. On the carpet vegetables are driven to frenzy in their desire to be ornamental. On a circular table (of course with pillar and claws) are placed books – too often selected for their bindings alone – arranged like the spokes of a wheel, the nave being a vase of, probably, objectionable shape and material. Add a narrow ill-curved sofa, and spider-legged chairs made to be knocked over, dangerous as seats even for a slight acquaintance, doubly dangerous for a stout friend – and all is consistently complete . . . Such is the withdrawing-room to which, because of its showy discomfort, no one withdraws.²

We might contrast this evocation of bourgeois vulgarity with Jane Eyre’s wide-eyed description of the drawing-room at Thornfield:

I thought I caught a glimpse of a fairy palace, so bright to my novice eyes appeared the view beyond. Yet it was merely a very pretty drawing-room, and within it a boudoir, both spread with white carpets, on which seemed laid brilliant garlands of flowers; both ceiled with snowy mouldings of white grapes and vine-leaves, beneath which glowed in rich contrast crimson couches and ottomans; while the ornaments on the pale Parian mantelpiece were of sparkling Bohemian glass, ruby red; and between the windows large mirrors repeated the general blending of snow and fire.³

Within the history of decorative art, the interior Charlotte Brontë imagines would be identified as being in the rococo revival style characteristic of the early years of Victoria’s reign; Orrinsmith critiques this kind of room from the “aesthetic” perspective of the late 1870s, after the reform movement initiated by men such as Henry Cole, Owen Jones, and William Morris. Any study of the

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-02815-8 - The Victorian Parlour
Thad Logan
Excerpt
[More information](#)

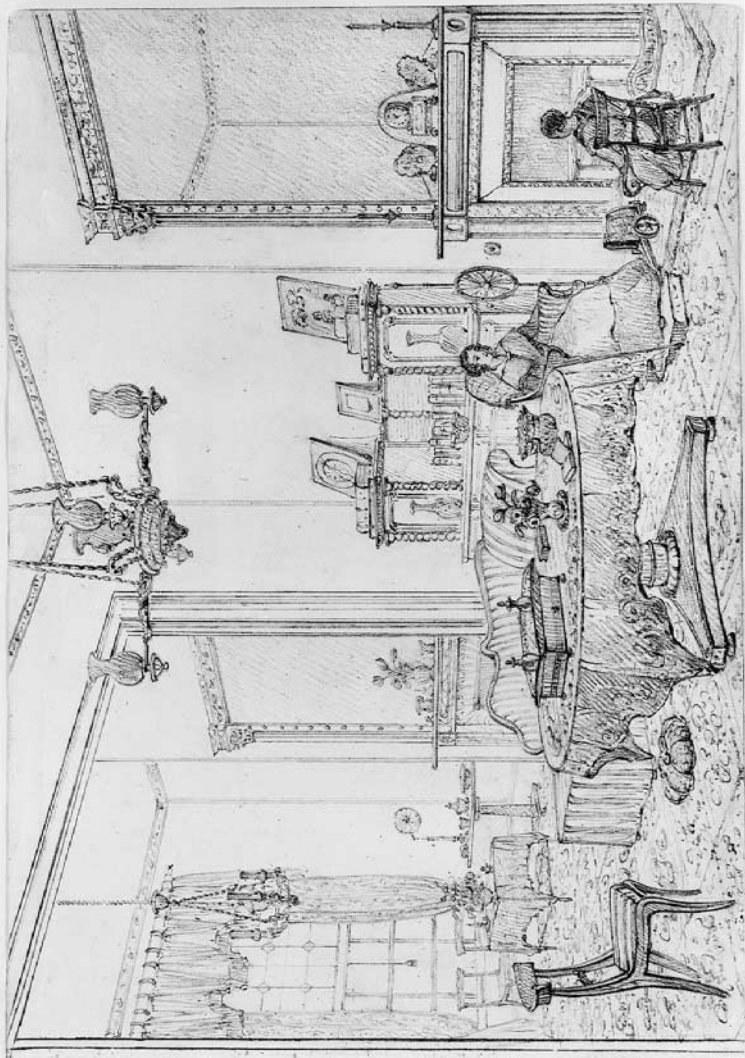


Fig. 1 C. C. Hunt, drawing of an interior; British, mid-century.



Fig. 2 Music sheet, mid-century.



Fig. 3 Frederick George Stephens, *Mother and Child*, c. 1854.

parlour has to acknowledge that there was a change in fashionable styles of interior design between the 1840s and the 1870s, although parlours such as Jane admired at Thornfield continued to be found in many homes until the last decades of the century. Despite changing fashions in design and decoration, which will be discussed in some detail in chapter 2, there were certain constants; as Mark Girouard has pointed out, “it is a curious aspect of almost any period that rooms which are deliberately different cannot help being in some ways the same.”⁴ While rooms produced before and after the rising tide of aesthetic reform do not seem so different to us as they evidently did to contemporaries, we can still apprehend some visual distinctions. Figures 1, 2, and 3 represent parlours in the rococo revival style; figure 4 shows an aesthetic parlour as imagined by Walter Crane.

The British parlour, whether of the forties or the eighties, was a self-enclosed room usually entered through a door leading from a central hallway. (Parlours in suburban or rural settings might well have exterior doors.) The size of the parlour might vary somewhat



“MY LADY’S CHAMBER.”

Fig. 4 Walter Crane, frontispiece to *The House Beautiful* by Clarence Cook, 1881.

depending on the site and the income of the inhabitants, but there was a good deal of regularity in the dimensions of London houses: one architectural historian notes that “the proportions were $30 \times 20 \times 14$ feet in height if possible.”⁵ There would usually be at least two windows, often more; in towns and suburbs bay windows were common. Until the end of the century, windows were likely to be elaborately draped, and the rooms in consequence would seem dim to modern eyes. After dark, lighting was provided by candles or by oil or gas lamps, although gas lighting was never particularly popular for the parlour: for much of the year, a coal fire would burn in the hearth. There was liable to be a good deal of furniture in the room. Orrinsmith gives us a clear picture of the larger furnishings still widely considered appropriate for the parlour in the 1870s when she cites (and censures) a contemporary advertisement for “Fine Italian Walnut Drawing-Room Furniture.” The suite includes the following:

a luxurious lounge, lady’s and gentleman’s easy and six well-carved chairs upholstered in rich silk, centre table on massive carved pillar and claws, the top beautifully inlaid with marqueterie, large size chimney glass in handsome oil-gilt frame, chiffoniere with marble top, lofty plate-glass back and three doors; lady’s work-table lined with silk, occasional table on spiral supports, two papier-mâché chairs and coffee-table to match, five-tier what-not, pair of handsome ruby lustres, and gilt and steel fender and fire irons with ormolu heads.⁶

Evidence from trade catalogues published later in the century suggests that such sets of drawing-room furniture continued to be produced and sold through the 1890s.

One of the most distinctive features of parlours throughout Victoria’s reign was the number of decorative objects found in them at all levels of social life. Although Peter Thornton has pointed out that “really dense massing of ornaments only comes in generally around 1860,” it is the accumulation and display of many such objects that sets Victorian interiors apart from those of the eighteenth and twentieth centuries.⁷ Even to attempt an inventory is daunting, and an effort to classify Victorian knick-knacks leads one toward the absurdities of Borges’ imaginary encyclopedia. There were items that covered (like antimacassars and lamp mats) and items that contained (pincushions or matchboxes). There were graphic and plastic representations of flora, fauna, and figures of myth and history: roses made of seashells, for instance, Lord Nelson

in porcelain or Parian ware. There were books and (after mid-century) photographs, ornamental glass and papier mâché, ferns and aquaria and peacock feathers, fans, fire screens, and clocks. Even when Victorian writers on interior design attempted to be stern in their opposition to excessive decoration, ornament seems to return, like the repressed. In the 1880s, Mary Eliza Joy Haweis wrote: “Large negro lads with glass eyes and arsenic-green draperies starred with gold, are not as suitable, even in a great hall, as a bronze Hercules or a really well-modelled elephant.”⁸ In a rhetorical move, which curiously repeats that multiplication of entities of which Haweis complains, Orrin Smith speaks contemptuously of

coal-scuttles ornamented with highly-coloured views of, say, Warwick Castle; papier-mâché chairs inlaid or painted with natural flowers or pictures; hearth rugs with dogs, after Landseer in their *proper* colours; mats and footstools of foxes startlingly life-like with glaring glass eyes; ground-glass vases of evil form and sickly pale green or blue colour; screens graced by a representation of “Melrose Abbey by Moonlight,” with a mother-o’-pearl moon.⁹

Yet some 100 pages later, finishing off her own advice about decoration, she states that “‘what shall be added next?’ should be a constantly-recurring thought,” and she goes on to suggest the acquisition of new treasures: “a Persian tile, an Algerian flower-pot, an old Flemish cup, a piece of Nankin blue, an Icelandic spoon, a Japanese cabinet, a Chinese fan . . . each in its own way beautiful and interesting.”¹⁰

In the twentieth century writers sometimes recoiled in mock horror from the bric-a-brac and whatnots, the proliferation of ornament that seemed to crowd the parlour. In 1933, for instance, Osbert Lancaster referred to the “objects of dubious virtue” that “the jackdaw strain inherent in every true Victorian led to the constant acquisition of,” and contemplated the multiplication of things in the Victorian interior with a sardonic eye:

The mantelpiece is transformed into a parade ground for the perpetual marshalling of rows of Bristol glass candlesticks, Sevres vases, Bohemian lustres around the glass-protected focal point of a massively allegorical clock. For the better display of whole cavalry divisions of plunging bronze equestrians, Covent Gardens of wax fruit, bales of Berlin woolwork, the drawing-room, the library, and the boudoir are forced to accommodate innumerable cupboards, consoles, and occasional tables.¹¹

Ralph Dutton, on the other hand, could find no humor in the

excesses of Victorian taste: he felt that, after the Great Exhibition, “[t]he change which had overtaken design seems now to have been dramatic and calamitous.”¹² During the first half of the nineteenth century, as Dutton sees it, “all trace of elegance . . . was effectively crushed, and one may search almost in vain through the pages of the *Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition* for an object amongst the wealth of furniture and ornaments displayed which it is not painful to contemplate.”¹³ Similarly, Olive Cook, in her study of the English house published in 1968, sounds an apocalyptic tone in her argument that past architectural tendencies “with disastrous potentialities, aesthetic as well as social . . . came to fruition in the Victorian era and are seen in retrospect to have exerted a malign, disruptive influence from which there has been no recovery.”¹⁴

Cook, however, also indulges, like Orrinsmith, in a list of some offending items whose “superfluity in the Victorian house turned it into a personal museum, the deathly, stifling character of which was the antithesis of the concept of home,” noting “the wax fruit, the feather flowers and stuffed birds under glass domes, the scrap screens, the shell-framed pictures of ships and seaside scenes, the ships in bottles, the sand bells, the pictures of cut paper and dried seaweed, the narrative paintings, the paper-weights through whose convex glass a building or a townscape leaps into three-dimensional life, the albums and mementos.”¹⁵ The rhetoric of Cook’s description of a Victorian middle-class home might itself be subject to analysis: we could, for instance, note how the governing idea here, as in many of the passages I have quoted above, is that of “superfluity,” and that this idea is elaborated on and embodied by a list of items presented to us as representative of the contents of a Victorian home. The items are in one sense quite ordinary – presumably, that is why they are listed in this context – yet in another sense they are presented as odd, unusual, and faintly comic. Moreover, the very collection of objects that in one sense constitutes the Victorian home also threatens it: superfluity turns the home into a museum. Aside from the glimpses of domestic interiors that they offer us, various linguistic representations of the Victorian interior and its contents allow us to read traces of anxiety, longing, and repulsion that are well worth considering in the context of cultural studies.

E. F. Benson, like many post-Victorians, wrote of that era with a wry nostalgia. In the following rather lengthy meditation on a lost pincushion, we can read this object as a kind of synecdoche for

Victorian design, and, perhaps, for the Victorian parlour itself. Benson begins by describing his search for the pincushion he remembers,

for which I have dived so sedulously and so fruitlessly into drawers full of Victorian relics, seeking it like a pearl in depths long undisturbed by any questing hand. But though I cannot find it, the search was richly rewarded in other respects, for it brought to light treasures long forgotten but instantly and intimately familiar when seen again: there was a dog-eared book of music, containing among other ditties the famous tear-compelling song, “Willy, we have missed you”; there was a pair of goblets incredible even when actually beheld and handled, chalice-shaped, of cloudy pink glass outlined in gilt; there was a globular glass paper weight, in which were embedded, like a layer of flies in amber, small gaudy objects, vastly magnified and resembling sections of jam roll and sea-anemones; and there were oval cards with pictures of flowers on them, which once certainly belonged to the apparatus of the round game called “floral lotto” so justly popular in the seventies. But the pearl of great price, the pincushion, did not discover itself to my divings, and its disappearance is a matter of deep regret to me, for it must have been rare and marvellous even when it was quite new, and if it was in my possession today I would confidently challenge the world to produce a similar specimen. But when I force myself to think dispassionately of it, I realize that it would be now sixty-six years old, so that even if I could put my hand on all of it that is mortal, I should but find here shreds of disintegrated red velvet and scattered beads, of which the thread had long perished. Yet since it was (though not new when I first saw it) one of the earliest objects to which I gave my unstinted admiration, I can describe the sumptuous manner of it with a very minute fidelity, for it is one of those memories of early childhood, photographed on my mind with colors as bright as itself.

Picture then (with an effort) a domed and elliptical oblong, the sides of which, below the dome, were perpendicular. Its scale, shape, and size were those of a blancmange for no less than eight people; such was the pincushion. It was covered, dome and sides alike, with rich crimson velvet, and round the lower edge of the dome ran a floral pattern, worked in white glass beads slightly opalescent. Down the perpendicular sides it was draped with many tassels of these, swinging free, and on top of the dome was worked a royal crown, also of beads.¹⁶

This remarkable object, “strictly of the finest taste of the period,” was probably made for a visit by the queen in 1864 to Wellington School, where Benson’s father was headmaster. Its beads, its tassels, its draping, its crimson velvet, and its plumpness all suggest both the domestic interior of mid-century and the body of Victoria Regina. The language of the passage suggests how richly detailed Victorian