FAMILIES, RELATIONSHIPS AND HOME LIFE

Introduction

The second half of the nineteenth century has been portrayed as a time when the working classes, now benefiting from a rise in real wages, became assimilated and reconciled to the society of industrial capitalism. Gareth Stedman Jones has argued that working-class culture became increasingly conservative and ‘respectable’. The majority of working-class marriages were now legal unions; and, as traditions of artisan radicalism began to decline, so too did the heavy drinking which had characterised earlier plebeian life. Such pastimes as cockfighting and bearbaiting began to die out as working-class leisure interests centred upon sports like football, and upon institutions such as the music hall. A new consumerism began to seep into the lives of the working-class, as they began to enjoy fish and chips, seaside excursions and cheap, imported foodstuffs from the colonies. According to Stedman Jones, the focus of working-class culture switched from the workplace to the home, a process which was facilitated by the advent of shorter working days (typically nine-hour days, and a half day’s holiday on Saturday).

In many historical accounts, women tend to emerge as the apotheosis of this newly passive, more conservative, working class. Women’s apparent embrace of domesticity and housewifery is often stressed. David Levine, for example, argues that the widespread acceptance of the idea of the male breadwinner wage led to the demise of the family wage economy. As a consequence, he suggests that gender roles within working-class life became increasingly compartmentalised. Thus, he claims that the second phase of industrialisation ‘dramatically’ ‘reordered’ the
private lives of working people. Such views were shared by the first generation of feminist historians. Nancy Tomes argued that the comparative decline in working-class domestic violence was partially explicable by the fact that once feisty, belligerent working-class women began to assume middle-class, acquiescent feminine roles. Similarly, for Ann Oakley, the acceptance of new concepts of childhood (which stressed juvenile dependence) was one of the many factors which ‘heralded the dependence of women in marriage and their restriction to the home’. Advances in the field of women’s history have, however, uncovered the complexities inherent in these cultural shifts. They also challenge the prevailing orthodoxy that women’s characters became submissive and dependent, revealing that women found new ways to express their individuality and establish authority.

Young Women, Sexual Relations and Courtship

Working-class marriages tended to be perfunctory affairs, conducted with brief ceremony and little fuss. For, whilst personal affection and sentiment were normally vital factors in the choice of a partner, marriage was still contracted for important economic and social reasons. It was in this spirit that Lucy Luck, a straw-plaider, married her husband, on the recommendation of her employer: ‘My girl, you have poor Will; he will make you a good husband, and he will never hit you.’ Women would usually endeavour to save as much as they could for their marriage, as their financial contribution – or practical abilities – could be essential to the new household. Young Welsh women practised their dairying skills to make them more attractive as potential wives to local farmers.

Middle-class observers were very hostile to the sexual behaviour of working-class women. Women with more than one lover, or who exhibited certain behaviours (such as drinking or engaging in sexual behaviour in public), might be classified as prostitutes. However, in many urban areas, parents continued to exert considerable control over the movements and courtship of their daughters, although those who emigrated to the towns from the countryside or from Ireland might enjoy greater freedom from their parents. In rural Ireland, however, patriarchal models of marital arrangement actually increased over these years. Here, arranged marriages were the norm and the practice of bridal dowries grew – largely due to the Irish Land Acts of 1885 and