

THE VICTORIAN PARLOUR

THAD LOGAN



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2001

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Baskerville 11/12.5pt System 3b2 [CE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Logan, Thad.

The Victorian parlour : a cultural study / Thad Logan.

- p. cm. (Cambridge studies in nineteenth-century literature and culture; 30)
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0 521 63182 3 hardback
1. English literature – 19th century – History and criticism.
 2. Home in literature.
 3. Literature and society – Great Britain – History – 19th century.
 4. House furnishings – Great Britain – History – 19th century.
 5. Living rooms – Great Britain – History – 19th century.
 6. Great Britain – Social life and customs – 19th century.
 7. Domestic fiction, English – History and criticism.
 8. House furnishings in literature.
 1. Title. 2. Series.
- PR468.H63 L64 2001
820.9'355 – dc21 00-050237
ISBN 0 521 63182 3 hardback

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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

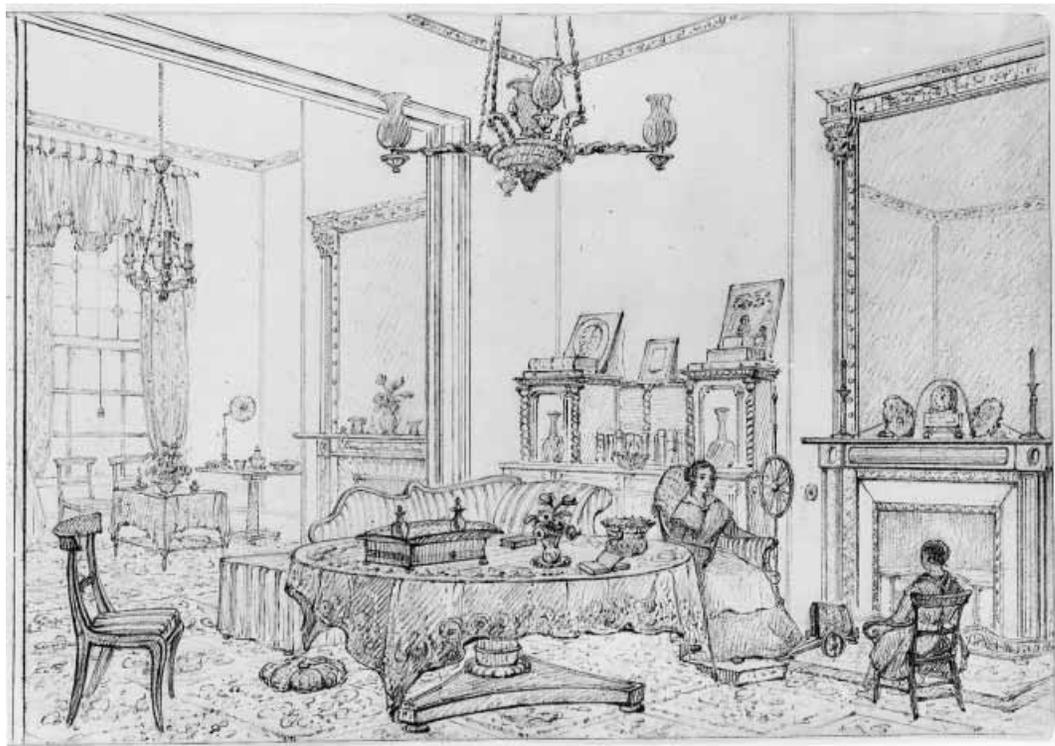


Fig. 1 C. C. Hunt, drawing of an interior; British, mid-century.

TAPPING AT THE WINDOW.



THE WORDS WRITTEN EXPRESSLY FOR A SONG BY
MISS E. L. WILLIAMS,
THE CELEBRATED
WELSH NIGHTINGALE,
AT
Willis's Concert Room,
TO WHOM IT IS DEDICATED BY
CHARLES SWAIN,
THE MUSIC COMPOSED BY
CARLO MINASI.

LONDON, LETCHFORD 17, SOHO SQUARE.

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 × 20 × 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

things could be, and how profoundly they could affect those who lived among them.

By the 1960s a serious reevaluation of Victoriana was well under way, and the last quarter-century has witnessed, if not a Victorian revival, a great deal of new interest in the design of the period.¹⁷ It is not difficult to see that the conservatism of the Reagan/Thatcher years produced a nostalgic fascination with the Victorian home: the “superfluity” that Cook, still writing from something of a modernist perspective in 1968, assumed to be “stifling,” later writers on Victorian interiors perceive somewhat differently. By the mid-1980s, the Victorian taste for elaboration of ornamental detail was, at least in some quarters, once again admired, and an entire shelter magazine, *Victoria*, was founded in 1988 to arouse consumer desire by evoking the aesthetic of a largely imaginary Victorian world – to “salute the comforts of the English home, from its rose arbors to its picture-lined mantels to its richly colored Victorian carpets.”¹⁸ According to Susan Kyle Leopold, compiler of two books on Victorian interior design,

the ideal Victorian home tended to boast a parlour that see-sawed clumsily between homely comfort and happy grandeur: its thickly upholstered chairs with well-padded backs, cosy fringed footstools and sumptuously curtained windows topped with swagged velvets, looped festoons, and lavishly trimmed brocades. Floors, copiously carpeted – an oriental rug perhaps layered over boldly patterned wall-to-wall – increased the feeling of a protected, womblike enclosure. With its rich, rustling masses of fabric, objects, and treasures loading the tables and mantels (a bounty of new things to admire), the whole was rich, warm, deeply satisfying, despite an admittedly egotistical undercurrent.¹⁹

While the clumsy see-sawing and the “undercurrent” Leopold refers to hint at a contradiction or conflict at the heart of this “womblike” environment, the passage as a whole focuses on wealth and its display in a manner that is at least as symptomatic of the 1980s as it is of the Victorian era.

Twentieth-century responses to and recreations of the Victorian world, however interesting, are beyond the scope of the current study. I have, however, attempted to offer some sense of the history of writing about Victorian interiors to introduce my own work, which is conceived neither as celebratory nor deprecating, neither appreciative nor debunking. While many people have written on the parlour, some of whom I have quoted at length here, and many have

written on Victorian taste, the parlour has not, to my knowledge, been taken as a focus of a critical, multidisciplinary inquiry. In the pages that follow I will chart the evolution of the parlour as a space within the domestic interior, and I will then go on to analyze the function of this space within the daily life of Victorian families, before turning, in later chapters, to a more elaborate discussion of the details of the parlour's decoration, the objects it contained, and the ways in which this space intersected with narrative and graphic arts. What I will investigate, in a variety of ways, is the appearance of the parlour. In one important sense of the term, that of "coming into being," the parlour appears within a material house and within an ideologically constructed "home." To begin with, then, it will be useful to situate the parlour as an object of study within both of these contexts. Indeed, to produce a definition of the term engages us in the history of domestic architecture, which is itself, of course, finally inseparable from the history of everyday life.

The domestic space I mean to investigate goes by different names: what I will be calling the *parlour* was also widely known as the *drawing-room*. The latter term is a shortened form of *withdrawing-room*; this does not, however, despite some popular misconceptions, originally refer to the nineteenth-century custom of ladies' leaving the dining room after dinner, but antedates this practice, and indicates a private place removed from more public reception areas.²⁰ I have chosen, in preference, the term "parlour" for several reasons. The first is that this is the older term; it is thus more useful for a long-range historical survey of domestic arrangements. Secondly, the term is more evocative, at least to my American ear, of the particular inhabited and decorated space that is the focus of my inquiry. The term *drawing-room*, moreover, tends to be associated with grander homes and more elegant surroundings, although the class distinction between the terms, in British nineteenth-century practice, was not in fact strongly marked. But insofar as *parlour* does have middle-class connotations, I prefer to use this term, since it is the middle-class interior that primarily interests me. While there are distinctions that could be made between the terms *parlour*, *sitting room*, and *drawing-room*, then, they are not important for the purposes of this study.

The *OED* derives the word *parlour* from the Middle English word *parlur* (from Old French *parleur*), and also cites the medieval Latin *parlatorium*.²¹ Originally the parlour was an apartment in a monastery or convent set aside for conversation, either with outsiders or

with members of the order. Thus, from the earliest recorded use of the term in the thirteenth century the parlour was a space removed from daily work and reserved for social interaction. The term has also, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, connotations of privacy; it is a space dedicated to the possibility of intimacy, set apart from the communal life of the monastery. Two other primary meanings offered by the *OED* reflect significant moments in the history of architecture, both aristocratic and vernacular, and reinforce earlier associations of privacy and separation. The second meaning given for the term *parlour* is “a smaller room apart from the great hall, for private conversation or conference,” while the third is “the inner or more private room of a two-roomed house, cottage, or small farm house, variously used according to locality, kind of household, etc., as the living room of the family distinct from the kitchen or as the ‘best room’ distinct from the ordinary living room.” To trace the development of the parlour, and to understand how it was situated in the nineteenth-century house, entails a brief look at domestic architecture in England.

The great hall, from which the earliest secular parlours were set off, was the center of aristocratic life in the Middle Ages and occupied for centuries an important place in English culture. This hall – or a memory of it – was to be preserved in great country houses through centuries of architectural change and replicated in “Stockbroker’s Tudor” mansions at the end of the nineteenth century. In Anglo-Saxon times, the hall was a large space designed for communal dining, with an open hearth at the center. At the “upper” end of the hall was the raised dais at which the higher nobility were seated for meals; service facilities like the kitchen and pantry were located at the “lower” end. Kitchens and bedchambers (or *bowers*) were at first separate buildings. As a result of the Norman invasion and consequent baronial struggles, defense became a top priority of aristocratic architecture in the eleventh and twelfth centuries; the hall was elevated to the second or third story and set above storage rooms; sleeping chambers were located either at one side of the hall or above it. As defense at this level became less necessary in most of the country by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, many members of the nobility began to build their houses with ground-floor halls and few or no fortifications. At about this time, a two-storied cross wing was added to the “upper” end of the hall: upstairs was a room called the *solar*, while the ground-floor

chamber came to be known as the *parlour*. The privacy of the space evidently appealed to the masters of the household, who increasingly chose to take their meals there rather than in the common hall: a “winter parlour” was later added in some establishments to provide similar private dining space at the opposite end of the hall, near the kitchen.²²

The three-part plan of hall, service area, and chambers was the model for Norman manor houses (those houses of the nobility that were centers of feudal administrative districts) and set a pattern for the domestic floor plan for several centuries. A similar development can also be found in vernacular dwellings, insofar as we can reconstruct them – few vernacular dwellings built before the fifteenth century have survived.²³ Just as interior space in great houses became more specialized, and inner or private rooms appeared at one end, so the open living plan of early farmhouses, which families often shared with their domestic animals, became divided into separate areas for food storage, cooking and eating, and sleeping. In this context, the parlour first appears as a small room adjacent to the combination kitchen and living room (known in some regions as the *house-place*). Notably, this parlour often contained a bed: Celia Fiennes’ reports of her travels in 1697 indicate that the parlour was still being used for sleeping some centuries after it had originally appeared.²⁴ But by the end of the Middle Ages, according to Anthony Quiney, “a substantial part of the population lived in houses that provided separate rooms for work, living, and sleeping.”²⁵ Most of the rural cottages that survived to play such a prominent role in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century imagination date from the “Great Rebuilding” of between about 1575 and 1660. In this period, many small houses were built, and regional variations in styles and materials appeared. In the south, the typical “yeoman’s house” resembled a diminutive manor house, with a clearly visible cross-wing; during the Tudor period, in particular, many such houses were half-timbered, with an upper story jettied out over the lower. In the north, houses were more commonly built of stone, and there was a tendency for the three parts of the traditional house to line up along a central axis, producing a rectangular-shaped dwelling known as a “wealden house.”

Although Henry VIII’s break with Rome temporarily halted the influence of the Continental Renaissance on English design, the Elizabethan era produced many great houses loosely inspired by

classical principles of design. A new interest in presenting a symmetrical architectural façade led to the development of a pair of cross-chambers; one was added on the service end of the hall for balance, creating a characteristic H- or E-shaped plan. Technological development in fireplace design had led to the replacement of the open hearth in the hall with a fluted chimney; this made it possible to floor in the upper portion of the hall, creating a long gallery, which by the mid-sixteenth century had become a requisite for the status-conscious.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Palladian villas, rather than Anglo-Norman manor houses, became the architectural model for upper-class dwellings. A powerful classical direction was given to British domestic architecture by Inigo Jones' dissemination of Palladian models. In 1618, Jones completed the Queen's House at Greenwich. Here, the old pattern of cross-chambers attached to a central hall gives way to a vision of the house as a square or rectangular block, whose main reception rooms are centered around an imposing staircase and located on the first floor, above a lower entrance level with a rusticated stone façade. Rather quickly, according to one study, "the central portico, the rusticated basement story, and the square-shouldered silhouette become distinguishing marks of even the most provincial country house."²⁶

The Palladian villa set the standard for great country dwellings for at least a century. Another important seventeenth-century house was that of amateur architect Sir Roger Pratt. Coleshill House (1649–62) represented one of the first uses of a "double-pile" plan: most Norman, Tudor, and Elizabethan houses were only one room "deep," although their wings might be quite extensive, and access to rooms was available only through other rooms.²⁷ At Coleshill, however, a central corridor gave access to rooms on both sides. What is especially significant here is the orientation of the house around a central hall and the incipient shift away from locating the service functions at one end of the house to locating them in back, thus establishing a now-familiar front-to-back axis. (It is also possible, however, to locate the origins for such a shift not in great houses, but in town houses, in which it was customary, given narrow street-fronts, to set one room behind another; or in the houses of squires or the clergy, which increasingly tended to integrate the old tripartite division of hall, cross-chamber, and service areas to produce a compact rectangular shape, much like the vernacular

wealden house.) In any event, great houses planned around a central entrance area (still known as a “hall,” though now much diminished in size) and a grand staircase were common by 1750. This floor plan, which persists throughout the Georgian period, appealed to a neoclassical interest in order and symmetry. Eighteenth-century homes, moreover, were increasingly standardized, in part due to building regulations governing new construction in urban areas, in part due to a relatively homogeneous taste in domestic architecture during this period. One recent history of the home in Britain notes that “[b]y the end of the eighteenth century nobody with any pretensions to status or wealth would consider building anything but a symmetrical house of double depth, with a central door leading into a hall from which a staircase gave access to the rooms around.”²⁸ The small, square Georgian house, whether of the gentry or the prosperous farmer, appeared throughout Britain and served as a model for the future development of the middle-class home in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Three general (and interrelated) principles seem to have governed the development of the house in the nineteenth century: a growing interest in privacy; a new inclination to rigid differentiation of the internal domestic space; and a desire to articulate social status. In each of these categories, the parlour was to play a key role. The Victorian era witnessed major building booms at all social levels as a result of a dramatic population increase in late eighteenth- to mid-nineteenth-century Britain. At one end of the social spectrum, great country houses were erected and renovated; British architecture was the scene of lively debates and hotly contested theories, and the building trades catering to the upper end of the market flourished. A great deal of housing, on the other hand, was constructed poorly and cheaply to accommodate the influx of workers into sites of industrial growth. The very poor found what lodging they could in older, decrepit buildings or in the hovels that mushroomed in the slums of growing cities. Middle-class housing encompasses a wide range of size and quality, yet two dominant forms can be identified, and it is these two types – the detached or semidetached villa and the row house – that constitute the architectural frame for the Victorian parlour. Since there are significant variations between the two types, I will discuss them separately.

Row (or “terrace”) houses proliferated in both urban and suburban settings during the Victorian era and included imposing

London mansions as well as cramped dwellings of Manchester operatives. In his exhaustive study, *The English Terraced House*, Stefan Muthesius observes that living in terraces rather than detached houses seems to have been, at least until the later decades of the century, a positive preference at all social levels.²⁹ Another historian writes that “[e]very visitor to London in the early nineteenth century was struck by the city’s boundless acreage of ‘terrace houses’: confined between narrow ‘party walls,’ lightly built of brick and timber, bare outside, boxy and cramped inside, yet neat, convenient, and tolerably private.”³⁰ While houses had been built in towns from the Middle Ages onward, the technique of building a series of houses that shared a “party wall” and presented a common façade derives from Inigo Jones’ design of Covent Garden for the duke of Bedford in 1630.³¹ After the Great Fire in 1666, which destroyed much of the old city and its half-timbered houses, London was rebuilt of brick and stone: many houses were built in contiguous rows, though not, at first, with attention to a unified façade. Demand for urban housing on the part of the minor gentry and the emerging wealthy middle class led, in the eighteenth century, to the development of imposing city squares in London and later in Bath, whose architectural unity was achieved by standardizing the constituent houses. By the nineteenth century, the terrace had become the norm for urban dwellings, and a standard plan had evolved; each house was like a half of the symmetrical, double-pile Georgian house, with a front door leading into a hall running the length of the house, from which doors opened along one side giving access into various rooms. Within this paradigm, stylistic uniformity within a given development articulated and preserved the class distinction by neighborhood which was a significant feature of English, as opposed to Continental, patterns of urban life.³² From one neighborhood to another, homes tended to be very similar to each other in layout but to differ in number and size of rooms, quality and quantity of architectural ornament, and orientation to the public street: each of these structural features allowed ample opportunity for the display of class markers.

The rapid development of large tracts of urban real estate was made possible by speculative building.³³ Landowners, working through their estate agents, or sometimes through an intermediary developer leasing the land from the estate, arranged to parcel out land into building sites, lay out streets, and dig sewage lines. In the

areas closest to city centers, terraces would be constructed: “[W]here land was less valuable,” according to Hugh Braun in *Elements of English Architecture*, “semi-detached pairs could be set on plots which made possible the provision of back gardens wider than those which extended behind a terrace, while the old economy of saving a wall was maintained.”³⁴ Builders took out leases on plots at a minimal rent; when they had completed the house, the builder would sell the lease of the plot with the house to another agent or let the house himself. According to the terms of standard leases, after ninety-nine years the plot and house reverted to the original ground landlord, who could start the process again by redeveloping the land or renting the house at a profit. (It is interesting to note that the domestic ideology of Victorian culture is not linked to actual ownership of the material house.) The value of a house was usually expressed in terms of its annual rent, calculated at 10 percent of the purchase price; the middle classes paid rent quarterly or semiannually; the working classes paid on a weekly basis. Muthesius estimates that 99 percent of residential construction in London during the nineteenth century followed this pattern of speculative practice, and that 90 percent of houses were rented rather than owned outright.

This pattern of construction and use of residential real estate depended on the existence of a well-organized infrastructure to provide and distribute materials to builders, a skilled workforce, and a sophisticated financial and legal system, all of which were in place by the early Victorian years. The house had become a commodity, constructed within a national market economy. Builders’ suppliers did a thriving business, since materials could be mass produced and cheaply distributed via the old canal system or the newly efficient railways. There was a growing demand for the labor of woodworkers, glaziers, painters, upholsterers, and other skilled artisans: most middle-class renters depended on the builders and the artisans they employed not only to apply decorative detail to features like windows and mantelpieces, but also to paint the interior and to provide wallpapers and trim (although many leaseholders repainted and repapered to suit their own tastes). But there was a sense that traditional methods of craftsmanship were disappearing. Standardization of plans and materials was in the economic interests of the speculative builders; it began in the eighteenth century and was well established by the nineteenth. Although architects might work directly with builders in designing more exclusive develop-

ments, builders' manuals and pattern books ordinarily provided plans for basic construction and decoration. In either case, the workman was unlikely to exercise much invention.³⁵ He was, however, the object of considerable attention on the part of what came to be the reform movement in design; it was concern for his training, as well as a more general concern for the rapprochement of art and industry, which led to the institution of the Schools of Design in 1836 and later to the establishment of the South Kensington Museum. James William Facey's 1882 book, *Elements of Decoration*, is an example of a text directed at craftsmen. Facey sounds a distinctly Ruskin-like note in his introduction:

No effort has been made to supply examples for imitation. The whole scheme of the book is to endeavour to show the decorative craftsman, however humble his sphere, the manner in which he may evolve in his own mind originality of conception, and may carry out in a skillful and tradesmanlike style the decorative effects which are so much sought after in homes of the present era.³⁶

The Linley Sambourne house at 18 Stafford Terrace in Kensington is a beautifully preserved example of a Victorian row house. Sambourne was a well-known cartoonist for *Punch*; he and his wife Marion lived a comfortable upper-middle-class life in the house, whose decor has been preserved with few changes. Their granddaughter Anne became countess of Rosse, mother of Anthony Armstrong-Jones and founding member of the Victorian Society; the house was opened as a museum in 1980. Stafford Terrace was built on lands belonging to the Phillimore estate: development of the estate began in 1855, but progress was slow, and number 18 was not finished until the early 1870s. Its layout is typical of the urban row house. The kitchen, wine cellar, and various service areas occupied the basement; on the ground floor was the dining room and a morning room, the drawing-room occupied the entire first floor, on the second floor were two bedrooms, and on the top floor the day nursery, night nursery, and maid's room. Another Victorian terrace house that has been preserved and opened as a museum, the house of Thomas and Jane Carlyle, though built much earlier, has a similar floor plan, as indeed did most urban houses of the period, although the Sambourne house is unusual in that the parlour extends over a whole floor.

Linley and Marion were married in 1874 and purchased a lease on number 18 from the estate of a Mrs. Bentley for £2,000. The

following details of their early days in the house are taken from Shirley Nicholson's book, *A Victorian Household*, based on the records and diaries meticulously kept by Marion.

The Sambourne's paid £150 for the fixtures (the venetian blinds, the gas brackets and pendants, the pegs on the doors, gilt cornices, brass curtain rods and so on) which were already there, but they did not care for Mrs. Bentley's taste in decoration. "Wallpapers throughout the house" were ordered from Messrs. Morris and Company at a cost of £35.5s. Mr. Smith of Baker Street was paid £17.10s. for painting, Messrs. Jackson and Graham and Messrs. Christies were paid £1.5s and £5 respectively for unspecified work, but the biggest sum of all went to Mr. Walter Nash, Builder. "Making alterations and extension of Morning Room, paper hanging, painting, laying on water, fixing picture rods, dado rails and general reparations," cost £240. It was also necessary to pay ten guineas to "Mr. J. G. Davies the Ground Landlord, being his commission on the alteration of the morning-room."³⁷

To a late-twentieth-century visitor, the most striking thing about the Sambourne house is the accumulation of decorative details: besides the forest of furniture, there are over 100 framed prints and paintings, so closely hung as nearly to obscure the William Morris wallpaper, and "a whole range of ornaments, lamps, and knick-knacks, including Neapolitan copies of Etruscan vases, Japanese painted vases, a French boulle clock, a bronzed reduction by Coalbookdale of John Bull's Eagle Slayer, shown at the 1851 exhibition, and a bronze nymph by Barbedienne."³⁸ Nicholson notes that "to modern eyes the house seems impossibly full; naturally some articles have been added and others lost or broken over the years, but taken overall there were probably even more things here in 1877 than there are today."³⁹ Architectural details are lavish throughout the house, particularly on the ground and first floors. In the dining room, for instance, there is an elaborate series of carved moldings along the ceiling, an embossed frieze designed to look like Spanish leather, a frieze rail and bracketed shelf for the display of china, and a dado; the ceiling is covered in stamped gilt paper, the wall in William Morris' Pomegranate pattern, and the skirting and dado are painted a dark olive green.⁴⁰ The drawing-room walls are similarly divided into three parts, with another high shelf for china circling the room. The Sambourne's taste was generally conservative, although their rooms clearly reflect the "aesthetic" style, which by the mid-seventies had become widely accepted. Their home at