DEFINING MASCULINITY IN THE VICTORIAN ERA

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Gender roles in the late 19th century were rapidly changing with the rise of the Industrial Revolution and the beginning of modern capitalism. Classes were divided based on social and economic status and men and women were placed into separate spheres. Women occupied the home, carrying out domestic tasks such as raising children and setting a moral example for the rest of the family, while men resided in the public sphere contributing to politics, economics, the workplace, and served the breadwinner of the family[[1]](#footnote-1). The primary source I have chosen, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, is a psychological study published in 1892 by Robert Kraft-Ebbing, discussing the nature of sexual instinct and how psychological factors shape gender roles. In Kraft-Ebbing's study, all aspects of sexual instinct are discussed including homosexuality, religion, fetishes, and even crime. It was produced at the University of Oxford in England as a massive success and studied for many decades as Kraft-Ebbing was a well-respected psychologist. In his preface, he calls attention to the psychology of love and how philosophy and poetry are the only disciplines to offer a view on love. Kraft-Ebbing created this study to scientifically highlight the nature of love and its “pathological manifestations of the sexual life and an attempt to refer them to their underlying conditions”[[2]](#footnote-2). To understand masculine superiority in society, investigations of the expectations of both genders from a young age must occur, as well as an examination of the different societal pressures placed on men and women.

The audience for the primary source is adult men and women as addressing the nature of sexual instinct is not relatable to children. Krafft-Ebing not only wanted to “promote tolerance for sexual inversion, but to advance the understanding of the existence and value of various sexual desire”[[3]](#footnote-3). This source has provided a foreground for other studies in sexology, paving a way for academics, scientists, and psychologists to further research on sexual instincts. Because Krafft-Ebing desired to explain natural instincts, discussing taboo subjects such as homosexuality, the limitations of this source revolve around how it was received in 1892. The message of this source was to explain the sexual tendencies of men and women. Through the explanations Krafft-Ebing provides of male instinct versus female, he was one of the first psychologists to progressively address other sexual desires. Krafft-Ebing's investigation of homosexuality and his definition of masochism and sadism, lead to disturbances within the church[[4]](#footnote-4). The source examines the societal changes the Western world saw during the late 1800s and the impact of the Industrial Revolution. The rise of capitalism and the integration of an industrial economy created the middle class with defined gender roles. These gender roles quickly became a known and “natural” part of society[[5]](#footnote-5) as domestic tasks were associated with women and public activities and responsibilities were designated to men.

The rise of women’s liberation called upon a reflection by both sexes for women’s rights to progress. In Tosh’s book, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, he discusses the relational quality between the two sexes and how masculine ideologies are shaped through this binary. “Neither masculinity nor femininity is a meaningful construct without the other; each defines, and is in turn defined by, the other”[[6]](#footnote-6). To examine the binary between the sexes, one must refer to qualities previously defined by academics and scientists that differentiated between the two. Many books in the late 19th century were published constructing the notion of the “bad boy” and attempting to distinguish between male and female qualities. Because many children's books embodied ideal feminine virtues such as tenderness, refinement, and restraint[[7]](#footnote-7), young boys spent most of their days outside, learning physical skills. “[T]he nature of boyhood by incorporating activities that appealed to boys' primitive instinct, such as playing cowboys and Indians, boxing, camping, and reading adventurous stories”[[8]](#footnote-8). Socializing boys from a young age to take part in physical activities helped shape the idea of masculinity from childhood, as girls read books and participated in activities at the church, home, and school. Separating the sexes from a young age based on activities that supported learning, educating, and entertaining differentiated the sexes from childhood.

The meaning of masculinity constructed in childhood during the Victorian era provided a baseline for men during the transition into adulthood. The domination of a male workforce and the normalization of a man’s control in his house aided in defining all masculine qualities as the exercise of power. “In most societies the exercise of power, both individually and collectively, is so inseparable from masculine identity that changes in the structure of sexual relations usually have a very direct - and sometimes undermining - impact on masculinity”[[9]](#footnote-9). Male domination is an integrated aspect of Western society today. On page six, Krafft-Ebing states that by women and men becoming more equal, the moral elevation of sexual desires became heavily rooted in love. “If nature does no more than provide for procreation, a commonwealth (family or state) cannot exist without a guarantee that the offspring shall flourish physically, morally, and intellectually[[10]](#footnote-10). He then goes on to discuss how all branches of Christianity must rely on the promotion of morality in sexual instincts. This statement in the very first chapter of this study demonstrates Krafft-Ebing’s desire to forcefully change the way people viewed sexual acts. Krafft-Ebing's investigation into morality and its relation to sexual instinct cannot be undermined as a defining feature of his study. Krafft-Ebing's ideas became very popular within Britain, with many sexologists and psychologists creating the World League for Sexual Reform (WLSR) which “promoted the dissemination of sexological knowledge within Europe”[[11]](#footnote-11). His work even caught the attention of Sigmund Freud, arguably the most powerful and impactful psychologist ever, as Freud’s work regarding sexuality were strongly related to those of Krafft-Ebing's.

This source is important to the understanding of sexuality as Krafft-Ebing's discussion of homosexuality as well as the terms masochism and sadism provided new developments in sexual instinct and desires. Krafft-Ebing also supplied a greater understanding of how the relationship and inequality of the sexes shape sexual dynamics, marriage, and domesticity. Defining masculinity in the Victorian era had to be acknowledged frequently, as the Western world was changing rapidly to adapt to capitalism and the new economy. Gender roles had to be redefined as class separation called upon a reorganization of individuals within their own societies. Krafft-Ebing's work attempted to dismantle previous explanations of “natural” qualities in men and women that previously segregated the sexes, while also providing new ideas about sexual instincts, paving the way for future psychologists and sexologists.

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1. Rebecca Beauseart, “Lesson 7: The Victorian Era: Maternity and Moral Panics” (Online Lecture, MyLS, March 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Richard Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Special Reference to Contrary Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Legal Study*, trans. Charles Gilbert Chaddock. (London: University of Oxford, 1892), IV. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Heike Bauer, "Richard von Krafft-Ebing's Psychopathia Sexualis as Sexual Sourcebook for Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness." *Critical Survey* (2003), 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bauer, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. John Tosh, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*. (New Haven: Yale University Press 1999), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Essays on Gender, Family and Empire*. (London: Routledge, 2016), 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Julia Grant, “A ‘Real Boy’ and Not a Sissy: Gender, Childhood, and Masculinity, 1890-1940.” *Journal of Social History*, (2004), 832. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Grant, 833. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Tosh, 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Krafft-Ebing, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bauer, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)