



CHAPTER 1

THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

Space once it is...bounded and shaped...is no longer a merely neutral background: it exerts its own influence. Ardener (1981: 12)

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Space is socially constructed. The spatial organisation of buildings and the organisation of space *in* buildings reflect and reinforce the nature of gender relations in society. In this way, space contributes to the power of some groups over others; architecture becomes a record of those who have the power to build. This is evident in nineteenth century architecture, particularly domestic architecture, where space was structured around the ideology of respectability. Domestic space has never defined society so powerfully, explicitly and strictly as it did in Victorian England. Thus, within the discipline of interior architecture, this study analyses selected texts¹ from the Victorian period (1837-1901) to investigate the relationship between the Victorian middle class obsession with respectability and the gendering of domestic space.

Victorian respectability, a complex combination of moral, religious, economic and cultural systems (Nead 1988: 8), contains a dichotomy structured around a heavily polarised understanding of gender. Respectability was an essential objective of Victorian existence and defined appropriate and acceptable modes of behaviour, language and appearance; these social rules and moral codes worked to regulate both gender and class identities (Davidoff & Hall 2002: xiii). Respectability wove a persuasive strand that bound the disparate elements of the middle class together. Hence, respectability was substantive in the creation of a coherent and distinct class identity which functioned to set the middle class apart from the social and economic classes above and below it. Respectability became inseparable from the home, the site of complementary masculinity and femininity, and can therefore, be used to understand the gendering of domestic space.

¹Texts refer to artefacts from the demarcated period (1837-1901) that contain embedded meanings or discourses, such as buildings, architectural drawings, user objects from the home, paintings, photographs, manuscripts and journal entries.



However, as Poovey (1988) and Nead (1997) caution, the smooth surface of Victorian respectability, like that of an unhappy family keeping up appearances, is artificial and deceptive. There was a disjuncture between the fantasy of femininity and everyday practice. In reality, Victorian respectability was fragmented, self-contradictory, contested and developed unevenly. The Victorians constructed notions of gender using the reductive, double categories of a binary opposition and wrote up sexual differences as ontological polarity. Men and women were two radically different beings who inhabited *separate spheres*. The latter refers to the prescriptive ideals of important sections of Victorian society, which provided a rigid framework of a world divided into male and female (Landes 2003:32). However, the paradigm of separate spheres, which has become a contentious issue amongst historians, is not to be confused with – although related to – the public and the private divide, which incorporates complex gender assignments that shift according to context (Davidoff 2003:11). Therefore, the notion of separate spheres and the public/private divide, against the context of Victorian domestic architecture, require re-visitation and provide a site of ongoing research.

The literature reveals a connection between respectability and the gendering of architectural space. Prevalent middle class beliefs about proper social relationships and the different roles of men and women were coded and built into the home (Walker 2002). In consequence, space was gendered and gender made spatial (Rendell 1998). Architects were instructed to install architectural and social propriety according to gendered ideals of the public and the private. Thus, the organisation of domestic space had to do with maintaining and indicating middle class gentility.

Within the didactic spaces of the home, the task of decorating and beautifying was seen as essentially feminine. However, the literature shows that women did not exclusively decorate their homes; middle class husbands demonstrated an investment in their homes and domesticity (Cohen 2003: 1001-1002; Tosh 1999). Furnishings, decoration and ornamentation of the home formed and structured sexual and social differences. Moreover, these physical attributes served as operative parts of an extensive system of communication. In so doing, the home, which is simultaneously public and private, articulates meaning both in the personal as well as in the larger social system, which envelops and enables the private experience.



Finally, an overview of the literature (cf Chapters 2, 3 & 4) shows that while intense and extensive study has been made of the Victorian period, it has been conducted within the disciplines of social, cultural and art history, as well as gender theory. Despite the significance of the nineteenth century home to the Victorians and scholarship alike, the subject of the Victorian domestic interior has been surprisingly neglected. While there is much published about what the Victorians said about their homes, little is known about why their interiors looked as they did (Cohen 2003: 1000-1001). Consequently, research on the relationship between the Victorian ideology of respectability and domestic architectural space and decoration is scant and has certainly not been exhausted. The area is open to critical analysis and the re-visiting of certain concepts, as well as the study of the relationship between these and the gendering of architectural space. To that end, this study aims to extend the scope of existing research on Victorian respectability and the gendering of domestic space within the discipline of interior architecture.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In the light of the above background, the main research problem is formulated as follows:

How does the ideology of respectability influence the gendering of Victorian domestic space?

The main research problem can be further subdivided into the following sub-problems:

1.2.1 Sub problem 1

How did political, social, economic and religious factors contribute to the ideology of respectability?

1.2.2 Sub problem 2

How are key concepts of Victorian respectability defined?

1.2.3 Sub problem 3

How was domestic interior space gendered in the context of urban middle class England?



1.2.4 Sub problem 4

How can embedded and gendered discourses in selected key texts associated with domestic space in the Victorian period be analysed to explore the dichotomy of respectability?

1.3 HYPOTHESES

Main hypothesis

There is a specific ideology of Victorian respectability, which is embedded in the making of Victorian domestic space.

1.3.1 Hypothesis 1

The political, social, economic and religious context of Victorian England contributed to the ideology of respectability.

1.3.2 Hypothesis 2

Respectability was a specific manifestation of the prevalent ideologies of the Victorian era.

1.3.3 Hypothesis 3

Domestic interior spaces are vehicles for the encoding of socio-cultural values.

1.3.4 Hypothesis 4

There are embedded and gendered discourses in Victorian domestic space that reveal the dichotomy in Victorian respectability.

1.4 DELIMITATIONS

The study is limited to urban England during the reign of Queen Victoria, 1837 to 1901. Married middle class women are chosen for this subject of the literature study because marriage provided the most typical role for the middle class woman in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, the study is limited to domestic space and its interior attributes.

1.5 DEFINITION OF TERMS

The following key terms are defined here for clarification:



1.5.1 Gender

Gender, originally used as a grammatical term in English, was adopted by feminist scholars in the 1970's to describe and analyse sexual difference. Gender allowed masculinity and femininity to be theorised as social constructions, separate although in some sense related to biological sex. Gender designates the socially constructed, mutually dependent nature of femininity and masculinity. Therefore, manliness is what is not feminine; femininity is the opposite of manliness. Furthermore, those definitions are not fixed in essence but are constantly changing as they are contested and reworked. Masculinities and femininities are thus historically specific (Shoemaker & Vincent 1998: 1; Spain 1992: xiv; Wolff 1990: 1; Hall 1992: 13).

1.5.2 Ideology

Poovey (1988: 3) defines ideology as a set of beliefs, the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence with two different emphases: the first is that ideology is coherent and authentic, the second refers to its internal instability and artificiality. Ideologies exist not only as ideas; they are given concrete form in the practices and social institutions that govern people's social relations. By definition ideology suggests something that is internally organised and complete.

1.5.3 Dichotomy

A dichotomy is a conceptual division into two mutually exclusive kinds. In each case one group is afforded power and status and the other group is rendered powerless and inferior. Feminists have demonstrated parallels with the male/female and public/private dichotomies to denigrate everything aligned with the female, containing it within private, controlled social spaces (Code 2000: 135; Weisman 1994: 11).

Terms that do not occur in the above paragraphs will be defined in the text.

1.6 METHODOLOGY

The problem is investigated by means of a literature review and a critical examination of suitable examples of Victorian domestic architecture, interior space and the decoration of domestic space. Literature selected for review is representative of a wide range of disciplines (art history, history of architecture, social and cultural history, and women's studies). This multidisciplinary approach has been taken consciously in order to gain a comprehensive view and critical understanding of the subject and the



circumstances which produced it. A set of criteria has been developed from the literature review and has been used to analyse the chosen texts. Five texts have been chosen as follows:

- The architectural drawings of the floor plans of Samuel Hemmings' £1,550 Model villa (c 1855);
- The architectural drawings of the floor plans of Lewis Cubitt's (1799-1883) Terrace, Lowndes Square, London (1841-43);
- The architectural drawings of the floor plans of Henry Ashton's (Apartment houses, Victoria Street, London (1852-54);
- Drawings documenting interiors by George Scharf (1820-1895) of four rooms in his house at 29 Great George Street, London (1869);
- The photographs of three rooms in the Sambourne House, 18 Stafford Terrace, London (1877) and the associated diaries of Mrs Marion Sambourne (1851-1914).

A detailed explanation of choice of each text is given in Chapter 5.

This study is exploratory and descriptive in nature. A narrative and interpretative style has been used to read the literature. A narrative style seeks to integrate a scholarly critical perspective within a narrative form (Kridel 1998:10). An interpretative research stance emphasises the detailed examination of a text, which can refer to spoken or written discourses, pictures, buildings or artefacts. This examination is carried out to discover meaning embedded within the text (De Vos & Schulze 2002:7).

Finally, the importance of the presuppositions of the researcher is recognised. I hold a feminist self-identity and consciously use a feminist critical approach. The complexity and diversity of feminist theory(ies) are acknowledged (Broude & Garrade 2005; Wolff 1990). However, in this study I understand that feminism broadly endeavours to give women a voice and to correct the male-oriented perspective that has predominated in the writing of the social sciences (De Vos & Schulze 2002: 7). Nochlin (1989: xv-xvii) summarises it as “thinking...history Otherly”, that is, one sees history from the point of view of the Other. Central to the project of studying history from the perspective of the Other are the questions of sexuality raised by feminism, and with those, concepts of power. More specifically feminist art history re-problematizes and reconstitutes the central issue of how meaning is produced in art and architecture. In this study it will be of particular use to analyse the male/female polarity in which the Victorian ideology of



respectability situates itself. Furthermore, with regard to critical theory, “Feminism's relation to critical theory is a contested site of theory and practice that generates new understandings of modernity and new types of social and political critique. Within critical theory, feminists address problems involving identity, exclusion, history, power and culture” (Fleming 2000:110-111).

1.6.1 Data collection

The primary data consists of architectural drawings, sketches, photographs and artefacts of the demarcated period. The secondary data consists of scholarly articles and monographs dealing with the demarcated period as well as correspondence and interviews with recognised experts in the field of Victorian history and architecture. The literature was sourced locally from the libraries of the University of Pretoria and of the University of South Africa, as well as nationally and internationally through an inter-library loan system. Literature was purposely selected across the disciplines (cf. 1.6). Most recent publications and relevant works cited in other works were given preference in an endeavour to establish a comprehensive view of both the period and current debates thereon.

1.7 OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the problem and its setting.

Chapter 2 considers the political, social, economic and religious context in which the ideology of respectability emerged.

Chapter 3 investigates key concepts of Victorian respectability. The notion of respectability and its implications for Victorian women is critically examined.

Chapter 4 investigates the gendering of Victorian architectural space. The notion of interior and domestic space is defined. The gendering of Victorian domestic interior space is critically analysed.

Chapter 5 analyses selected key texts associated with domestic space in the Victorian period to explore the dichotomy of Victorian respectability.



Chapter 6 provides a discussion and proposes a model, based on the overall research findings, to be used to examine Victorian respectability in domestic space in other contexts. It includes a recapitulation, conclusion and recommendations for further study.

1.8 SUMMARY

This chapter provided an introduction and background to the problem, the research questions, aims and methodology used in the study. Key terms have been defined and an outline of the organisation of the study has been given.



CHAPTER 2

**THE CONTEXT OF THE IDEOLOGY OF VICTORIAN
RESPECTABILITY**

SUBPROBLEM 1 How did political, social, economic and religious factors contribute to the ideology of respectability?

PRÉCIS 1 In this chapter Queen Victoria's accession to the throne, her personal life, as well as the political, social, economic and religious context of Victorian England are considered, so as to elucidate the emergence of the ideology of respectability.



2.1 INTRODUCTION

The adjective, 'Victorian', is not a precise term. Victorianism long antedates the coronation of Queen Victoria in 1837. It owed many of its outstanding characteristics to developments which took place between 1780 and 1837 and the late Victorian era can be considered as part of the twentieth century (Seaman 1973: 5; Webb 1980: 130). The Victorian age cannot thus be thought of as being encapsulated in the sixty-four years of the monarch's reign, since ideas and attitudes changed more slowly than the mortality of the Queen.

The Victorian era is not merely part of continuity greater than itself, but contains within itself many discontinuities and incongruencies. Yet the ideal of respectability, which permeated every aspect of the conscientious Victorian's life, remained constant throughout.

This chapter provides a study of the context of Victorian England out of which the ideology of respectability emerged. Victoria's accession to the throne and her personal life as a model for respectability are briefly discussed. Thereafter, the political, social, economic and religious contexts are critically considered in their contribution to the Victorians' obsession with respectability. Finally, the middle classes as the main instigators of Victorian respectability are discussed. This chapter serves to depict the historical context of this study in an endeavour to reveal how the ideology of respectability permeated and dictated every aspect of Victorian England, and in so doing, illustrating its influence on the gendering of domestic space.

2.2 QUEEN VICTORIA

*May children of our children say,
'She wrought her people lasting good;
Her court was pure; her life serene;
God gave her peace; her land reposed;
A thousand claims to reverence closed
In her as Mother, Wife and Queen.'*
Tennyson (1858)

Queen Victoria provides a dichotomy in the ideology of respectability. She embodied respectability's feminine ideal. She was charming, pure, hardworking and excelled in the tricky arts of family life. Yet, at the same time, she was its antithesis; she was



strong-willed, opinionated and firmly held the position as her country's sovereign. Thus, she is an example of the many incongruencies characteristic of her age.

Victoria was only eighteen years old when she ascended the throne in 1837 and ruled until her death in 1901. At the time of Victoria's accession Britain was in a state of social, political and economic turbulence. Despite her youth Victoria assumed her new position with gravity, composure and dignity. The public received the new queen enthusiastically, in particular, impressed by the stark contrast between Victoria and her uncles, who had been decadent, selfish and disreputable (Strachey 1921: 37). Victoria's youth and gender were symbols of hope for her subjects, reminding them of the prosperity England had enjoyed under previous female rulers (Thompson 1990: xv, xvii). As a sovereign, she remained securely on her throne throughout her reign unlike many of her European counterparts, while the institution of the monarchy strengthened as she grew older (Seaman 1973: 436). Victoria exhibited distinctive personal qualities: she sketched and painted, performed and enjoyed music, and wrote letters and kept diaries which afford much insight into her life and into the conventions of the period (Ford 1992: 3). She displayed sound common sense, a strong awareness of dignity and a lack of pretentiousness, but most striking of all was her remarkable will-power (Seaman 1973:436-439; Strachey 1921: 37; Thompson 1990: 3 & 24). Victoria's childhood was shaped by a sober German influence: her mother, the Duchess of Kent; her uncle, Prince Leopold, and her governess, Baronness Lezhen. Her good, homely and thrifty mother, disgusted by the frivolous and undisciplined English court, was determined that her daughter would be most respectable. She was intent to establish Victoria thus so that when the time of accession came Victoria would deal with her new situation soberly. In so doing, the virtues of simplicity, regularity, propriety and devotion were impressed upon Victoria (Strachey 1921: 25).

In 1840 she married her cousin, the German prince, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg, whom she had met a few years prior and had considered very handsome, kind and honest. Albert was invaluable in sobering her judgement and ways (Strachey 1921: 31). He was intelligent, a systematic thinker, more directly involved in the arts than she and was keenly interested in the sciences and their relation to technology (Ford 1992: 4; Seaman 1973: 440; Thompson 1990: 33). One of his most valuable characteristics was the keen interest he took in politics. Initially this interest was met by opposition from the English Parliament who thought that he, as a foreigner, had no right to take part in British politics. However, gradually his political acumen was appreciated and he



made several valuable contributions. Victoria was greatly influenced by him and sustained his political opinions into widowhood (Strachey 1921: 84-85).

Among the changes in the way of life of the royal family which took place during Victoria's reign, the most striking were the changes in sexual, marital and family behaviour (Thompson 1990: 15). Victoria was passionately in love with Albert and he himself showed great concern and affection for his wife and children. Their marriage provided the respectable ideal of a happy nuclear family (Thompson 1990: 33), lacking the intrigue and infidelity that typified other royal unions. Victoria and Albert settled into the harmony of married life and life became an idyll of happiness, love and simplicity, underscored with a strong sense of duty and hard work (Strachey 1921: 87). Hard work, a moral sense of duty and family were in line with their subjects' values and a means to maintain the political and social order of the country. The affairs of state co-existed happily with their pleasant domestic routine and suited the prevailing idea of respectability. The public, the middle classes in particular, approved of a love-match within a household which combined the advantages of royalty with virtue. The remains of the frivolous eighteenth-century were apparently subsumed by duty, industry, morality and domesticity (Strachey 1921: 98).

However, in 1861 Victoria experienced the loss of both her mother and later, in December, of her beloved husband (Strachey 1921:139). The death of Albert signified a watershed in the history of Queen Victoria, who went into mourning for many years. Yet she was determined to follow the goal of her husband to work tirelessly in service of her country. Her mourning period marked by her stoical devotion to duty also shaped the character of the age.

The character of the age is fully discussed in the ensuing section.

2.3 CHARACTER OF THE AGE

The Victorian mind was composed of a variety of often paradoxical ideas and attitudes (Houghton 1957: xiii). As a result, the character of the period appears fragmentary and incoherent, yet there is interconnectedness. Moreover, the frame of mind according to which Victorians lived and thought reveals some primary sources of the modern mind (Houghton 1957: xv).



The Victorian period has been described as the age of transition (Houghton 1957: 1). By definition an age of transition has the dual aspect of destruction and reconstruction. As the older order was being attacked, modified or discarded, the new order was being proposed or inaugurated. Beside overall transition and progress a distinctive characteristic of the Victorian age was its high sense of moral responsibility (Seaman 1973: 6). Various factors were responsible for this respectable consciousness, the most obvious being religious revival (Davidoff & Hall 2002: xviii). Victorians were almost always acting with reference to their all-pervading belief in the moral imperatives of personal responsibility, of duty and of living for something other than the satisfaction of the immediate needs of the self (Houghton 1957: 59; Seaman 1973: 6).

2.3.1 The state of society

By the late nineteenth century the feudal and agrarian order of the past had been replaced by a more democratic and industrial society. Democracy was significant not only in the transference of political power from the aristocracy to the people but also in the appearance of the phenomenon known as a *democratic society* (Houghton 1957: 4). The cause of this displacement of the old concept of status was more closely related to economics than politics. The economic impact of the Industrial Revolution underlay the democratic revolution and saw the rise of the middle classes. Once the middle class gained political and financial power, their social influence became decisive. The Victorian way of thinking was largely constituted by their characteristic modes of thought and opinion (Houghton 1957: 5).

The Victorian period is perhaps best known for its tremendous industrial development, which introduced new machinery for manufacture, communication and locomotion. However, Vickery (1998: 206) criticises classic assumptions about the impact of economic change between 1780 and 1830. Revised economic histories suggest a number of factors that contributed to social development. Nevertheless, the old system of fixed regulations which in turn fixed social relations was replaced by the principle of *laissez-faire*, in which the manufacturer used the cheapest means possible to make the most money (Houghton 1957: 6). Simultaneously, this free-wheeling society felt the enormous pressure of work. Further, Seaman (1973: 15) states that the Victorians' huge energy and commitment to work was also driven by their moral consciousness, an obligation to God or to fellowmen. Another characteristic of life in the nineteenth century was speed as both the tempo of work and the tempo of living increased.



Houghton (1957: 7) describes this fast life, stating, “They felt they were living a life without leisure and without pause; it was a life of haste and above all excitement.”

2.3.2 Intellectual and emotional context

The radical transition in human thinking was less overt in society but was gradually seen in an atmosphere of unrest and paradox pertaining to moral and intellectual issues. Old certitudes were no longer fixed and a reconstruction of thought was required. The Victorians lived between two worlds: moral certainty and doubt (Houghton 1957: 9-10). All intellectual theories, including those of morality, were in some sense insecure. John Morley (in Houghton 1957: 11) asserts, “It was an age of science, new knowledge, searching criticism, followed by multiplied doubts and shaken beliefs.” The proliferation of scientific knowledge which almost overwhelmed the Victorians contributed to doubt and uneasy feelings that their beliefs were no longer quite as secure as before (Houghton 1957: 12). However, the belief in reason and morality held by the majority endured the age and were largely able to displace doubt (Houghton 1957: 21; Seaman 1973: 6).

Thus, the Victorian age was an *age of transition*, societal and political, and an *age of doubt* about the nature of humankind, society and the universe (Houghton 1957: 23). Yet, the products of the age, scientific positivism and the ideology of respectability, provided the Victorians with a sense of order and hope.

2.3.2.1 Optimism

The start of the Victorian period saw a revival of hope based on the idea of progress. Pearce and Stewart (2002: 11) assert that optimism was a common attribute of Victorian thought. It was also accepted that in a progressive country change was constant. Change was considered progress and the age was thus considered a transition to an even greater one. The Victorians felt they were on the threshold of an even greater era. Although political and economic developments created a favourable environment, scientific theory and invention together created an atmosphere of supreme optimism about the present and the future (Houghton 1957: 33). The intellectual achievements of the nineteenth century had extended scientific assumptions and methods from the physical world to the whole life of people. Intellectuals felt that finally the human mind had been liberated from false methods of theology and metaphysics that had explained the universe to humankind in past centuries. They felt they possessed the key to Truth through science (Houghton 1957:



35). Furthermore, progress through applied science was associated with material and moral improvements. The Victorians believed that both the quality of life and moral habits could be improved through education, better drainage and ventilation, railroad travel and the achievements of the arts (Houghton 1957: 41; Pearce & Stewart 2002: 11).

Their other vision of Utopia had less to do with scientific advance. It was a metaphysical conception of the universe founded in the theory of natural evolution (Houghton 1957: 36). Progress in this sense was not accident but necessity (Houghton 1957: 37). Ironically, out of this political, economic and scientific progress, the Victorians developed and maintained their fixed idea of the social roles of men and women: Victorian man could transform himself and his circumstances because of progress; Victorian woman was relegated to a particularly static position. The Victorians were already satisfied with what they had become and were confident in their expectation that they would become more of what they already were (Houghton 1957: 38, Seaman 1973: 6). Pearce and Stewart (2002: 12) state that optimists believed freedom and individual effort to be the keys to progress, although this was largely the privilege of middle class men.

Nevertheless, the decline of the old order of political and religious institutions caused alarm in some Victorians; others viewed it with relief and joy as they shook off the yoke of aristocratic privilege and theological dogma (Houghton 1957: 45). The optimism of political progress rested chiefly on the advance of social freedom than on social equality. The Victorian desire for liberty was headed by the middle class who desired political and economic freedom.

2.3.2.2 Anxiety

Paradoxically the era was also pervaded by doubt. At the same time as expanding business, scientific development, the growth of democracy and the decline of the old order filled Victorians with hope for the future; there were also sources of distress. Davidoff and Hall (2002: xiii) posit:

The early nineteenth century in England was a time of heightened fear about both social and economic chaos and the perils of daily life. Partly as a reaction, among the middle strata at this period there was especial fascination with carving up their world into discrete categories and classes. These preoccupations show in the forms of nascent science, the filters of evangelical religion, the intense grading of social and economic groups, particularly of men and women.



Despite the seeming solidity and strength of Victorian society, it was filled with dread of some outbreak of the masses, which would overthrow the established order and confiscate property (Houghton 1957: 55). Democracy was seen by some to be incompatible with property ownership and therefore incompatible with civilisation (Ford 1992: 27). Seaman (1973: 12) suggests that middle class morality was a bulwark against the lack of civilised standards amongst the new urban masses.

Houghton (1957: 58) states that this period also saw a decline in Christian belief in England due to intellectual and scientific developments and that this along with the prospect of atheism had social implications. It was assumed that any collapse of faith would destroy morality. Seaman (1973: 21) differs: the second half of the century did not imply the demise of Christian belief but a gap opened between the theology of the people, which was bibliocentric and congregationally minded, and the theology of the theologians. The non-intellectual quality of the people's theology did more to weaken the hold of religion over the people than science did but the Church survived this intellectual crisis in relatively good order. Pearce and Stewart (2002:8) contend that religion figured more deeply in the lives of Victorians than the findings of a census conducted during the period indicate. Seaman (1973: 6) posits that the strict moral code was foremost a result of religious revival. Religion contributed to the period's close adherence to laws of respectability; if the moral code disappeared, society would disintegrate.

Anxiety was also fuelled by the Victorian commitment to work; the pressure of work resulted in worry and fatigue. For the lower classes work meant grinding toil for barely sufficient wages, the ongoing fear of unemployment and the awful conditions of their slum dwellings. At the same time the business and professional classes also worked hard and long hours in the face of the constant anxiety of financial failure. The ambition to climb the social ladder also added pressure as financial failure meant loss of social status (Houghton 1957: 61).

The breakdown of traditional thought led to an emotional state of ennui and doubt. The traditional Christian idea of the universe was being displaced by a scientific picture of a vast mechanism of cause and effect, acting by physical laws that governed humankind itself (Houghton 1957: 68). Indeed, isolation and loneliness, characteristic of the modern era, is first detected in the nineteenth century. Houghton (1957: 77) attributes this to the demise of a long-established order which led to the fragmentation of both



society and thought. In this process people became acutely conscious of their alienation. Democratic-industrial society was not a cohesive society; society was now a collection of individuals driven by self-interest. The modern city was the creation and symbol of this liberal-industrial society. People's connection with rural neighbours or ancestral villages was lost in the exodus to factory towns or London; as a result the sense of community was permanently lost.

2.4 POLITICAL CONTEXT

A continuing 'democratic revolution' (Ford 1992: 27) occurred throughout the nineteenth century, which involved not only the extension of the suffrage but also the identification of new democratic issues, derived from the ideas of the French Revolution. This process was conflictual and depended on who was in power, which made it uneven and confused. Although the reign of Victoria never saw Britain become a true democracy, the British political system succeeded in providing certain elements of a modern political system: stability without stasis and dynamism without destruction (Pearce & Stewart 2002: 16).

The monarchy was theoretically like that of most European countries of the time. However, in practice it belonged to the dignified part of the constitution; it was decorative, aroused reverence but held little political sway. According to Pearce and Stewart (2002: 16), Victoria could advise, even irritate and was possibly useful in foreign policy, but otherwise her influence was limited.

The cabinet was central to the British government and was comprised of policy-making ministers responsible for all major decisions. All the cabinet ministers were male and largely landowners; no Prime Minister was without landed estate. As Pearce and Stewart (2002: 17-18) indicate cabinet ministers not only governed the country, they also owned a large section of it. However, wealth alone was insufficient to gain the position of Prime Minister, which required a capacity for extremely hard work, political cunning, oratory and absolute ambition. The number of government departments was limited and their activities narrow, operating through a small civil service. No qualifications for government or civil service were laid down and family influence and personal networks determined appointments. Cabinet ministers were answerable to Parliament for their decisions and for the mistakes of their civil servants. The House of Lords was composed entirely of hereditary peers and bishops, who received great



social respect. In theory it was the equal of the House of Commons but in practice the Commons exercised greater power and influence.

In geographical terms there were wide discrepancies in representation. According to Pearce and Stewart (2002: 19), new urban England was grossly under-represented in Parliament. The Great Reform Act of 1832 allowed males the right to vote based on property ownership. Thus, the voters were mainly made up of middle class males. Women could not vote because it was believed that they were emotionally and intellectually unsuited. At the same time it was held that their husbands and fathers could effectively exercise the vote for them. Similarly where workers were excluded, it was felt that their employer could speak and vote for them.

Clearly the democracy of the British government was limited but Pearce and Stewart (2002: 20) show that it did not only consider male interest or the interests of the landowning aristocracy. The burden of tax was largely carried by the rich who, while they governed the country, also paid for its government. Basic satisfaction with the political system was revealed in the failure of radical reformers to arouse popular support to reform Parliament itself. There was a fear that to extend the franchise would lower the tone of politics, strengthen corruption and replace serious political debate with increased alcohol consumption and cheap slogans.

2.5 SOCIAL CONTEXT

During the Victorian age Britain became a predominantly urban society, unique in the world's history of which the implications were enormous. Its population increased rapidly through the nineteenth century, in part due to industrial wealth but social conditions were poor (Ford 1992: 19). The birth rate increased; the death rate doubled. Many were undernourished. Causes of death were related to the seasons: in winter the cold caused deaths and in summer water-borne diseases were the reason, in particular, cholera which was the result of poor almost non-existent sanitary conditions in urban areas (Pearce & Stewart 2002: 2; Seaman 1973: 42). In industrial towns which had sprung up around factories, city planning or sanitary provision for the masses was absent. Seaman (1973: 48) states that the squalor of the new towns until the mid-century was, to a certain extent, a consequence of the general mind-set of the public at the time: free-trade and the doctrines of self-help and individual responsibility. Socially the English were lacking in any tradition of civic pride, derived from either



public or private enterprise. Pearce and Stewart (2002: 2) and Seaman (1973: 48-50) concur that eventually the state of cities could no longer be ignored and public health was at risk. Efforts were made by Public Health reformers in the 1830's and 1840's but progress was slow and met with resistance in government. Seaman (1973: 51) suggests that the impetus for sanitary regulation came from sensible professional men and influential locals who reacted angrily but intelligently to the conditions of the new industrial landscape. Ford (1992: 20) agrees: health was achieved not only by doctors but also by the engineers who implemented urban sanitation. In the last quarter of the century market forces, state and municipal action combined to produce a dramatic improvement in life expectancy. The state finally grasped the importance of public health and legislated such basic needs as sewerage disposal and clean water supply.

Social order was achieved not by the re-organisation of the police in 1857, but through the strength of the individual, family disciplines and codes of conduct (Ford 1992: 20). This is significant, indicative of the regulatory role that the ideology of respectability played in Victorian society. Thus, respectability grew from the idea of family and domesticity and not from legislation. People were not compelled to be respectable by external factors, rather by the covert notions of morality, gentility and fear of disorder.

2.6 ECONOMIC

During the Victorian age Britain became a predominantly industrialised society. By the mid century the growth of Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow reflected the importance of textile manufacture, which had become a vital component of national wealth. A large portion of the cloth produced was exported. The factory system and factory life were the norm. Coal-mining, iron-production and ship-building were the other great industries which made Britain foremost in the world by 1867. The 1860's also saw the steam engine emerge as indispensable. The railway was the vital exponent of the economic scene which had been invented and developed first in Britain. By the late 1860's an extensive rail network covered the country and created a new lifestyle. As a result the country was connected not only in time and space through travel, but also ideas were able to circulate widely. (Pearce & Stewart 2002: 3-5).

During the period Britain achieved the world's richest economy entirely out of her own resources (both local and those obtained by the exploitation of her colonies): materials, finance and skills. Seaman (1973: 45) states that the entire industrialising process in



Britain was an improvisation, undertaken without benefit of sophisticated techniques of business organisation, supporting professional skills or planned government action. Most inventors and entrepreneurs never had formal training; the profession of engineer was officially developed out of the iron industry with the building of bridges and need for structures for factories and railway stations. According to Pearce and Stewart (2002: 6), in 1870 approximately one-third of all manufactured goods worldwide came from Britain. She left all her rivals behind and established a staggering economic lead.

Seemingly the average Briton was considerably richer than the average continental citizen. However, wealth was rather unevenly distributed and poverty was still rife. Despite this, Pearce and Stewart (2002: 8) suggest that the Victorians made great strides in attacking poverty through ingenuity, capacity for hard work and a substantial amount of greed. Furthermore, Seaman (1973: 41) attests that it is misleading to overemphasise the effects of industrialisation on the workers' way of life. One cannot generalise about conditions among 'the working class' in the nineteenth century. Nor can it be assumed that the majority of workers were to be found in factories or mines. Moreover, it cannot be assumed that, because coal-mining and power-driven factories were a result of the Industrial Revolution, so too were poverty, gruelling hours of work and filthy living conditions. The pre-Industrial Revolution period had not necessarily been better when it had been estimated that most of the population had been dependent on charity or poor relief (Seaman 1973: 44; 73). In the second half of the nineteenth century, economic expansion was so great that almost everyone benefited from it although the gap between rich and poor continually widened till 1900.

Women and children of the working classes had work to supplement low wages. Yet, in this way the basic unity of family was maintained to some extent. Furthermore, the tempo of industrial work was no longer related to the seasons. There was no slowing down in the winter; workers had to labour continuously. The length of the working day no longer depended on seasons either; regardless of daylight hours workers had to work the hours required by their employer to produce uniform outputs. Circumstances were very competitive and as a result entrepreneurs had to try producing the most at least cost, which meant wages were minimal. Workers put up with it because it was better than starvation.

Finally, Thompson (1988: 29) sums up the effect of the new economic conditions:

It was not a question of the Victorians improving, reforming, institutionalising, and more or less cleaning up a rough and raw society



which they took over from the preceding half century of headlong economic change; it was rather a matter of their fashioning the elements of a new society in step with the appearance of its material and human components.

2.7 RELIGION

The Victorian moral imperative was in part the result of the religious revival embedded in Wesleyanism and the Evangelical movement within the established Anglican Church (Seaman 1973: 6; Thompson 1988: 250-252). According to Houghton (1957: 220), the Evangelical movement transformed the character of English society and imparted to the Victorian age the moral earnestness which was its distinguishing characteristic. Evangelical religion inspired an obsessive belief in work, sobriety of behaviour, respectability and self-help. According to Hall (1998:181), Evangelicalism provided a crucial influence on the nineteenth century definition of home and family. Between 1780 and 1820, in the Evangelical struggle over anti-slavery and the reform of manners and morals, a new view of the nation, of political power and of family life was forged. The Evangelical emphasis on the creation of a new lifestyle, a new ethic, provided the framework for the emergence of the Victorian bourgeoisie. The uncertainties of commercial and manufacturing activities in an unstable and constantly changing environment, the demands of international trade and the hope for progress for the rich or survival for the poor, lay in conducting one's life with a conscious and sensible regularity (Seaman 1973: 7). While these ideals of behaviour were not entirely new, originating as part of a Puritan ethic, Seaman (1973: 7) states they became the predominant creed of the Victorian period because they were socially useful. Christianity was a religion of personal salvation and a social religion for the moral improvement of society. Seaman (1973: 8) posits that the reason that a moral code which fitted the period's economic and social needs emerged from a religious revival in the eighteenth century was because the thinking and feeling of all, except an intellectual minority, could be formulated in no other way but the religious idiom of the time. However, Tosh (1999: 34) argues that to interpret religious observance, particularly in the home, as merely a feature of social change, is to underestimate the power of religious belief at that time.

Revivals continued to occur throughout the Queen's reign. John Wesley's uneasy relationship with the Anglican Church led his followers into gradual separation as the Methodists. Methodism ultimately found itself outside of the Established Church (Seaman 1973: 10). His emphasis on a consciousness of sin and the necessity of



personal conversion was responsible for a new intensity and sobriety among the lower-middle and working classes (Webb 1980: 128). According to Webb (1980: 39), Methodist sermons appealed particularly to those whose lives were bleak and uncertain; the dry, scholarly sermons of High Churchmen repelled them. Within the Established Church revival was located in the evangelical movement, which revived Christianity in the middle to upper classes. Evangelicalism began partly as a response to Methodism and like Methodism it emphasised the sense of sin, the weakness of man without God, the profound psychological experience of conversion and dedication to service (Webb 1980: 128). On another level, William Booth's Mission, formally constituted as the Salvation Army, did much for the working classes. The morality emanating from religious revival was seen by the middle class Victorians as essential to a civilising process in the newly urbanised and chaotic masses. The respectable dogmas of self-help and personal responsibility contributed to making life under the social conditions of Victorian England (cf 2.6) more bearable.

However, Vickery (1998: 207) questions the extent to which Evangelicalism was an exclusively middle class project. Vickery cautions that it would be mistaken to see Evangelical enthusiasm thriving in every middle class home. The religiously cold, backslidden and utterly indifferent also existed. Houghton (1957: 60) maintains that the Victorian devotion to the moral code was such that those who abandoned a supernatural religion still believed in the validity of morality itself and saw their morality to be purer than that of Christian morality.

2.7.1 Religion and domesticity

The beginning of the nineteenth century saw the separation of work from home. The home became a refuge from the world, the site of religious observance. According to Tosh (1999: 34), the notion of home as a refuge from worldly labour had a strong religious basis, as did the whole of nineteenth century domesticity. Various denominations placed new emphasis on the saving power of the godly household, thus the character of Victorian domesticity was defined by religious input.

The husband had a responsibility to sustain the faith of the converted and to show the way to those who were not, usually children and servants. In the theology of most Evangelicals the loving authority of the earthly father was seen as a microcosm of divine authority, sanctified by God himself. The husband's sacred authority was subsequently balanced by his wife's high moral status (Tosh 1999: 35). Religion was domesticated; the home was the site of Sunday Bible-reading, daily family prayers,



keeping of spiritual diaries and the death-bed. In this way the gulf between home and the world was emphasised. Tosh (1999: 36) contends:

The home might no longer be the site of production, but its deeper, more moral purpose now became clear. By drawing religion into the home at the same time as work was being taken out of it, the hold of domesticity over the middle class was greatly intensified and produced much of its tone and character.

2.8 THE MIDDLE CLASSES

The Victorian middle class was comprised of a number of strata, bound together by their commitment to an imperative moral code. Nead (1988: 5) points out, "It is inaccurate to imagine the Victorian middle class as a singly unified entity. The middle class was composed of a diverse range of occupational groups and levels of income." Furthermore, Thompson (1988: 64) contends that while the progression from the crowded city streets to the tranquil elegance was typical of the Victorian rising middle class, only some occupations, chiefly the professions, could be assumed as wholly middle class or upper-middle class. The professions which made up one great segment of the Victorian middle class were medicine, law and the Church. Tosh (1999: 11) states, "Membership of these 'old' professions received gentlemanly status because of the requirement of formal education and partly because giving advice for a fee held little of the commercial taint attached to buying and selling in the market place." Other professions secured recognition too, such as accountancy, engineering, surveying, architecture, men of letters and journalists. Yet men of trade and business constituted the majority of middle class. The most successful enjoyed meteoric careers and became fabulously wealthy. Below them were owners of medium-sized factories, bankers and merchants, who were the backbone of the commercial middle class. In the Victorian period middle class dignity required an annual income of no lower than £300 per year and the same was true of the professions. Such an income could run to a commodious house and at least three servants (Tosh 1999: 12). At the bottom came a broad base of less-highly considered occupations. This level of society became known as the lower middle class.

Middle class men and women placed themselves in opposition to an indolent and dissolute aristocracy and a potentially subversive working class (Davidoff and Hall (2002: xviii). Tosh (1999: 13) states:

The distinctions of status and wealth to be found in the middle class were greater than in either the working or upper classes. The middle classes were distinguished from the aristocracy because they worked



regularly for a living, and from the working class, because they did not do manual labour. Within the moral economy of Victorian society these were significant distinctions. Moreover, such status was more valued because it could not be taken for granted. They were keenly aware of how precarious all forms of business were. The risk of failure could never entirely be discounted.

Houghton (1957: 191-2) posits that failure was the worst fate one could imagine in this environment. To be left behind in the race of life was not only to be defeated; it was to be exposed to the same kind of scorn and humiliation dealt out to poverty. Failure was attributed to a weakness of character, a symptom of moral corruption.

The Victorian period was marked by a continued separation of work from home. The middle class ideal was a home in the country, or as close as possible to it – in a leafy, green suburb. However, Tosh (1999: 15-17) points out that many middle class families still lived over the shop or immediately adjacent to their work premises. Nevertheless, the dominant tendency was from being a site of productive work, the household was increasingly becoming a refuge from it. Moreover, according to Tosh (1999: 17):

The most critical precondition of middle class domesticity was the withdrawal of the wife from direct involvement in the productive work of the household. Once breadwinning was removed from the home, it soon came to be accepted that wives should have nothing to do with it. With work being located outside the home, the implication of intruding in the public sphere and perhaps forgoing her husband's protection were disturbing.

The husband's status as breadwinner, thus, confined the wife to the role of homemaker.

The changing character of the household went beyond just space and locality; it became a badge of social status and moral standing. Branca (1975: 6) states "...in the middle class life-style...the drive for social esteem became an obsession." Tosh (1999: 17) and Branca (1975: 6) concur that a non-working wife, a contingency of servants and an elegantly furnished home was a more convincing symbol of a man's status than his business or profession. This new image brought dramatic and direct changes in the life-style of the middle class woman. The house had to provide more than just a haven for family withdrawal for the home was also the stage for social ritual and outward manifestation of status in the community (Dickerson 1995: xviii).



2.9 CONCLUSION

In Chapter 2 the first hypothesis that the political, social, economic and religious context of Victorian England contributed to the ideology of respectability was investigated. The study was exploratory and descriptive in nature. The chapter was written in a narrative style, a framework of information on the subject was established, while at the same time acknowledging where sources colluded and differed. It was found that the character of the age was marked by transition and doubt, the products of which, positivism and respectability, provided the Victorians with the sense of hope and order. Order was maintained not through civil action, but rather the strength of the individual, family discipline and codes of conduct, indicative of the regulatory role that respectability played within Victorian society. However, the factor that most contributed to the Victorian moral imperative was the result of religious revival, in which the home was central and which inspired an obsessive belief in work, sober conduct, respectability and self-help. Respectability became the most compelling strand binding together the disparate elements of the middle class within the revised domestic world. In this way the initial hypothesis was confirmed.