

The Changing Role of Women

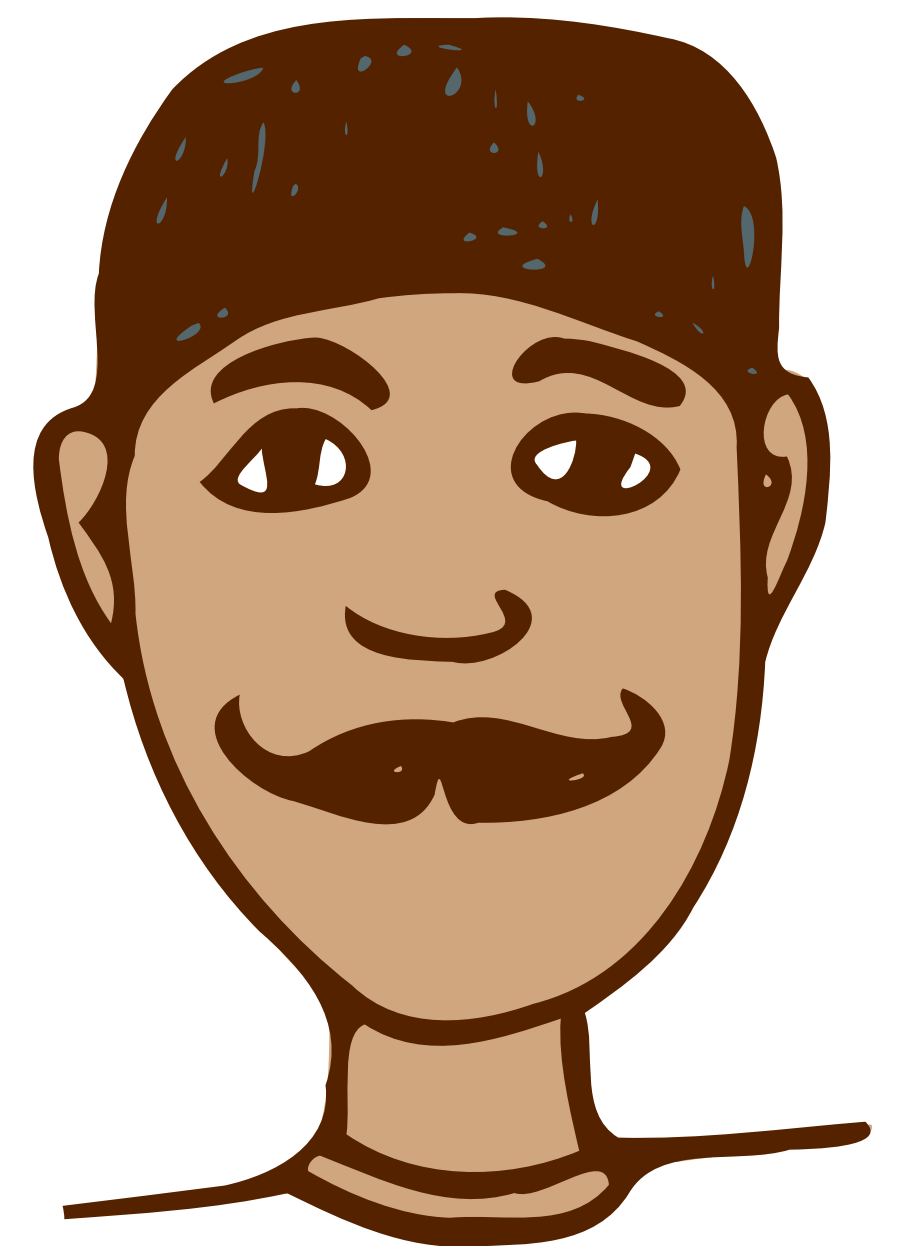
Learning Objective:

To find out about women's roles in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries.



This is Margaret Hughes. She is credited with being the first female in a particular profession in England in the 17th century.

What do you think that profession might have been?



Margaret Hughes was the first female actress. She stepped onto the stage for the first time on 8th December 1660. Until then, women hadn't been allowed on the stage and all female parts had been played by men.

Theatres were closed altogether under the reign of the Cromwells as plays were regarded as frivolous, but when Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660, he not only re-opened the theatres but also legalised acting as a profession for women. Margaret Hughes, Nell Gwyn and Elizabeth Barry were amongst the first actresses.



Nell Gwyn

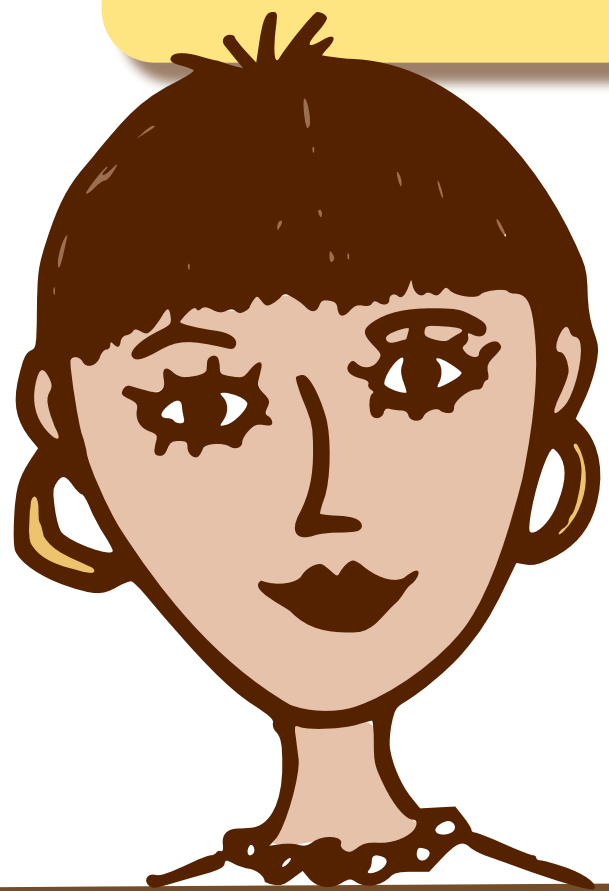


Elizabeth Barry

Why do you think women weren't allowed to be actresses before this?

Prior to the 1660s, having women on the stage was thought of as indecent. Not only were there very clear laws on what women could and couldn't do, there were also a lot of social constraints that stopped women from doing things that were seen to go against the 'natural order'. A woman's place was in the home, not out in the public sphere.

Most people, including women, didn't question this. It was just the way things were and just as they had been for thousands of years.



What do you think about this?

In the 17th century, most professions were barred to women in Britain. They couldn't become doctors, teachers, lawyers, politicians or almost any other profession. If a woman had to work, she worked as a maid or servant, by helping out in a shop, inn or bakery, or by doing embroidery or spinning. There were very few options.

Things continued in much the same way throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. Poor women continued to be denied an education whilst wealthy women could expect to be taught how to read, write, sew and behave like 'ladies', all in aid of finding a suitable husband.



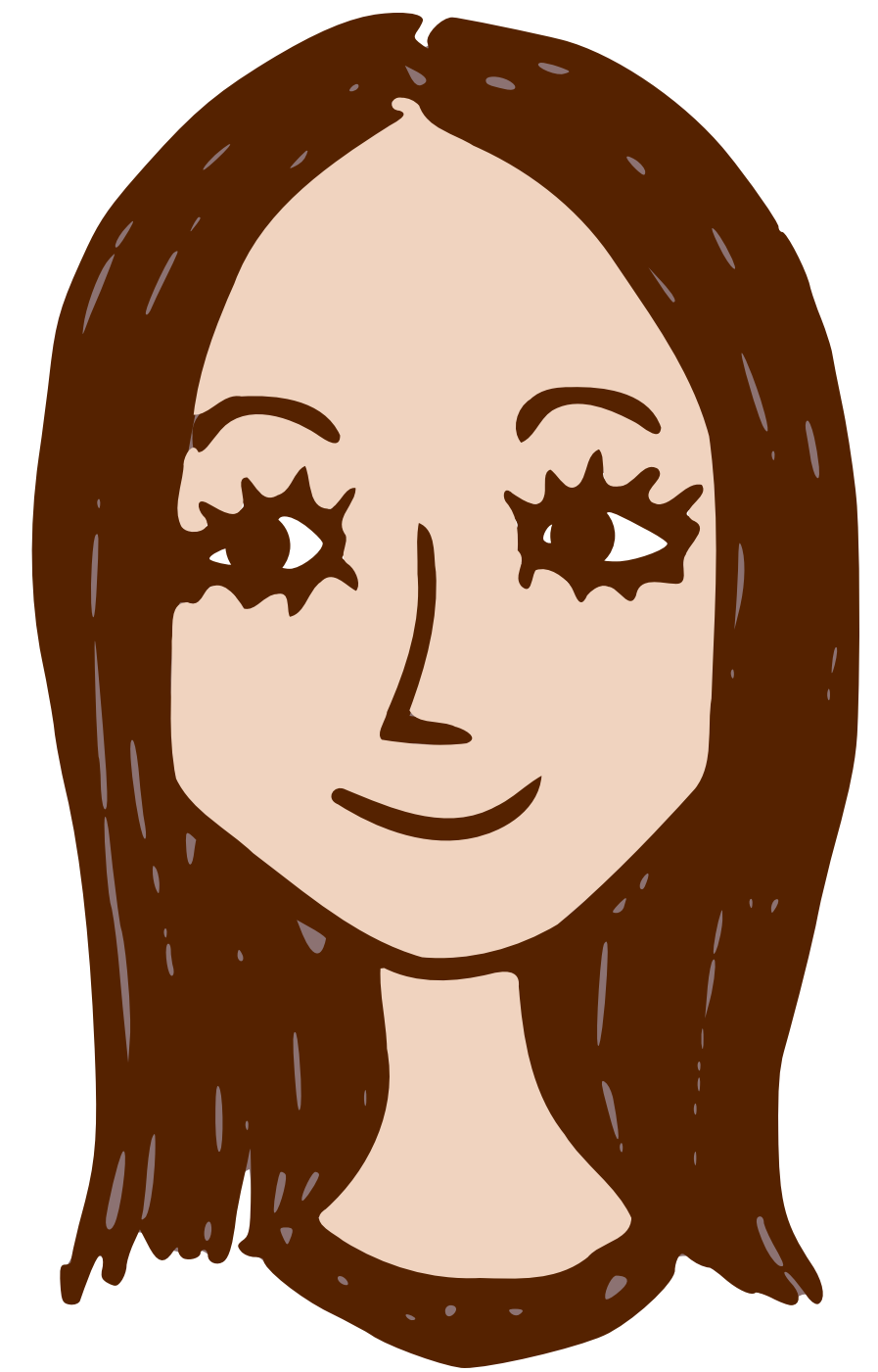
Le Nain Brothers: 'A Peasant Family' 1640



John Greenwood: 'The Greenwood-Lee Family' 1747

However, by the 19th century, things had started to change. More and more women were starting to question their role within society and speak out against the patriarchal world in which they lived. One of the safest ways to do this was through writing. There are many famous female authors from this period who used their novels to highlight the inequality between men and women, such as Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters (Charlotte, Emily and Anne).

Charlotte Brontë's most famous book is 'Jane Eyre' which was first published in 1847. Jane is an orphan who is sent to a school for orphans by her rich aunt. She later becomes a governess but finds herself feeling bored and unsettled. Let's read an extract together...



“It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.”

Charlotte Brontë, ‘Jane Eyre’



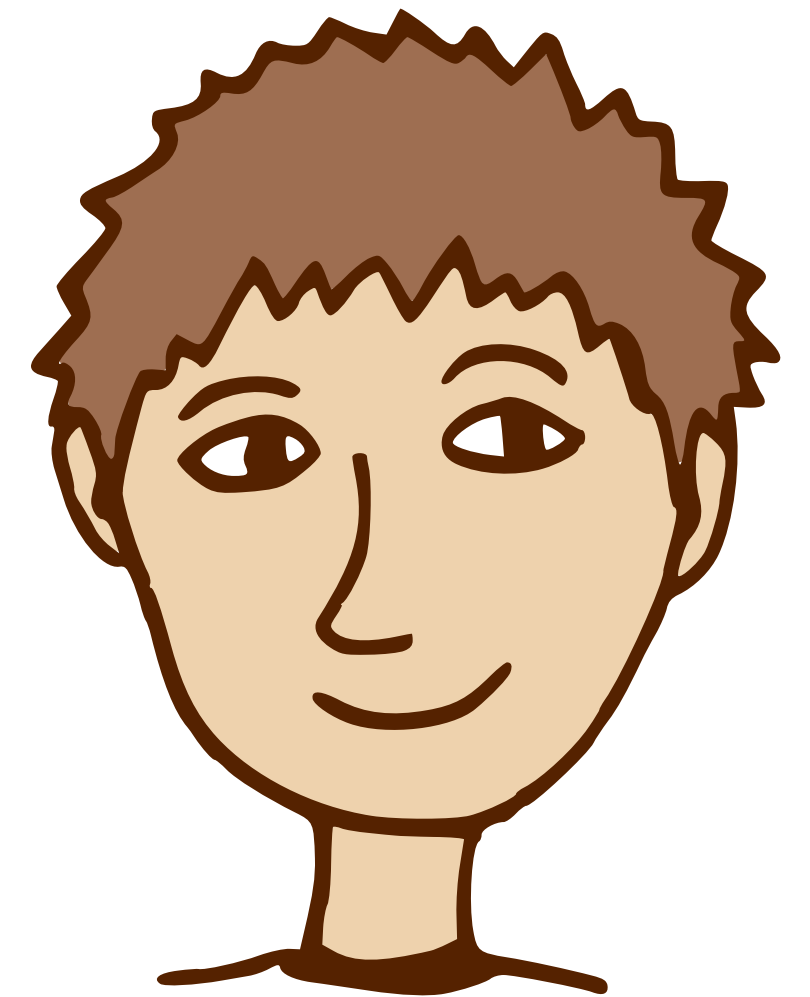
What do you think Brontë is saying through Jane in this passage?

Another important book is Mary Wollstonecraft's 'A Vindication on the Rights of Women' which was published in 1792. This book is considered to be one of the first great feminist texts.

"Make them [women] free, and they will quickly become wise and virtuous, as men become more so; for the improvement must be mutual, or the injustice which one half of the human race are obliged to submit to, retorting on their oppressors, the virtue of men will be worm-eaten by the insect whom he keeps under his feet"

A Vindication on the Rights of Women

What do you think Mary Wollstonecraft is saying in this extract?

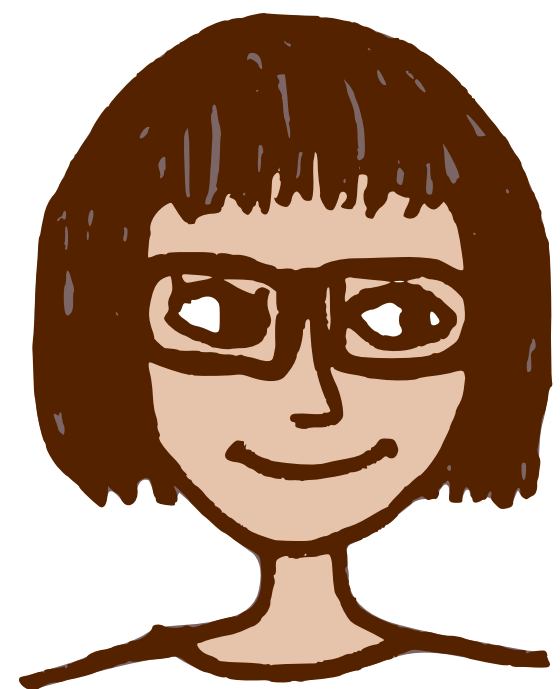


The 19th century in Britain was a period of great change. Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837, the Industrial Revolution was in full swing, and more and more people were moving away from the countryside to live in towns and cities.



How do you think the Industrial Revolution would have affected the roles and rights of women in the 19th century? Would it have been a positive change or would it further have restricted them?

For the working classes, women's roles remained relatively unchanged. Women were in charge of raising the children and taking care of the house, and they went to work if the family needed the money. As well as the usual domestic service and working in shops or inns, many women could now work in factories.



What else do you notice about this picture?

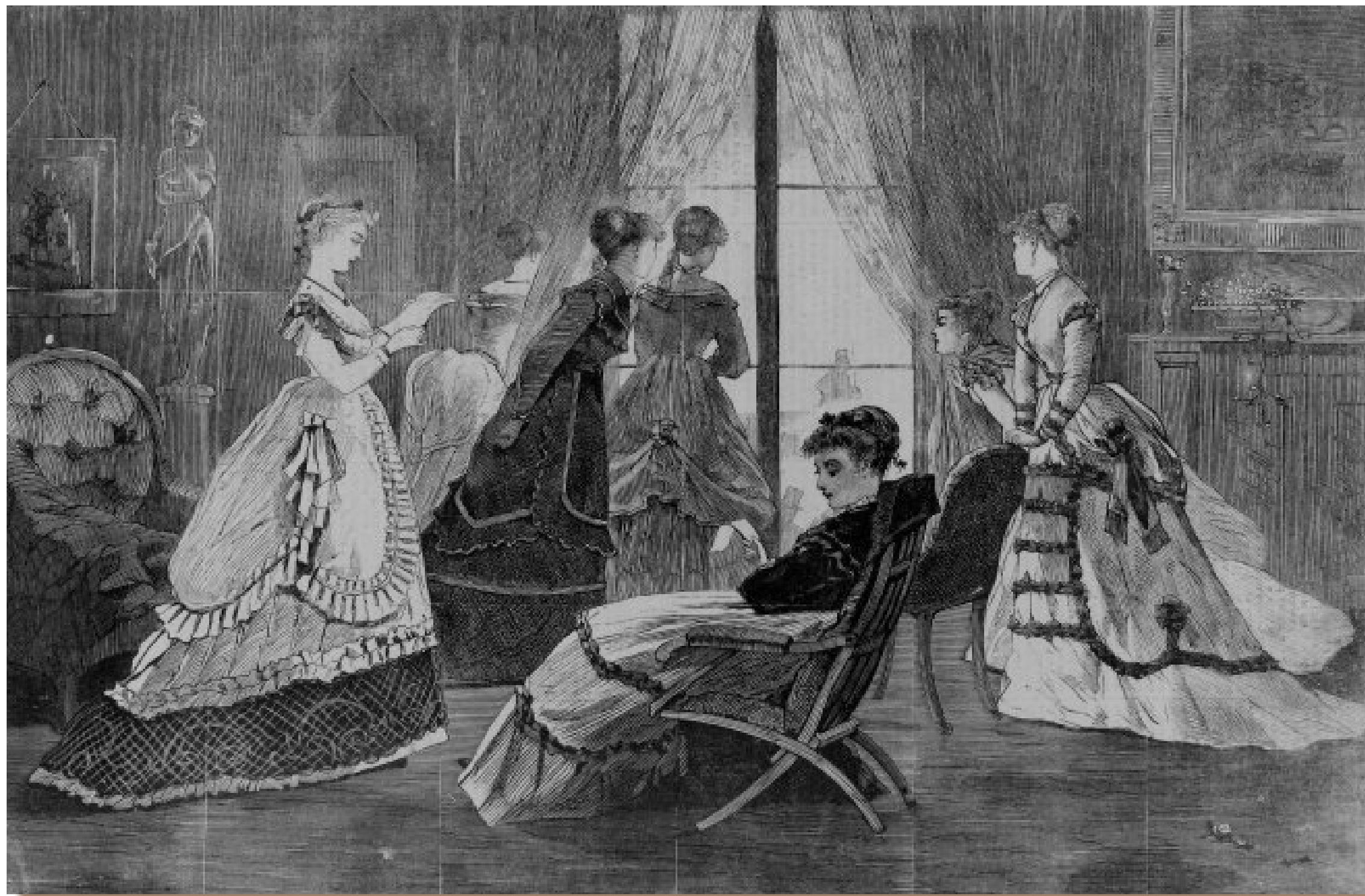


It was the growing numbers of middle-class women who really saw a change during the Victorian era. People had started to become better off so more and more people were able to hire servants to take care of the domestic chores. This left middle-class women without anything to do.

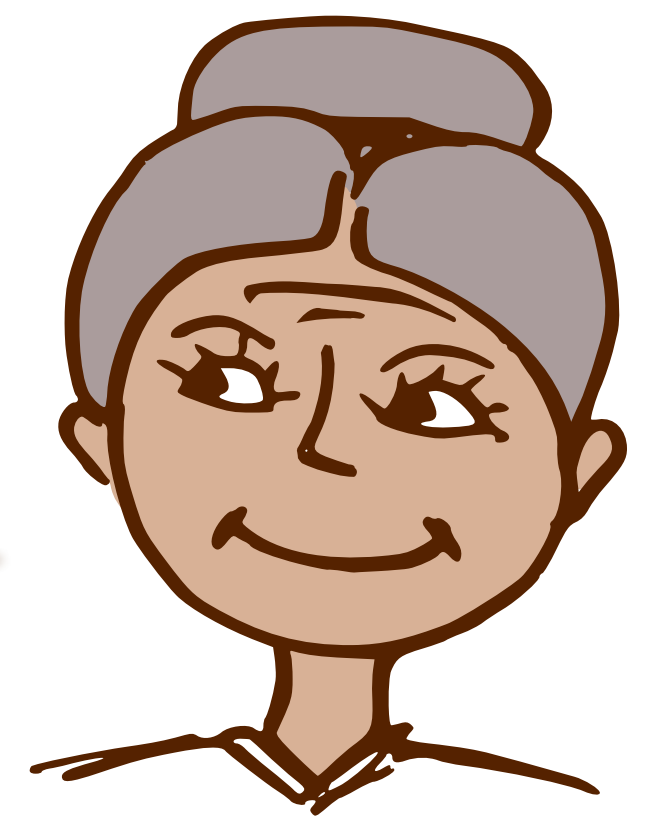


They couldn't go to work - this would have been seen as a sign of poverty - and they no longer had to cook and clean so they had nothing but leisure time. The lifestyle which, until now, had only been a reality for the richest women in society was now a fact of life for a large portion of British women. Most middle-class families would have had at least a cook, a maid and a nanny to look after any children.

For these women, learning how to behave in society was of paramount importance. There were lots and lots of rules that both men and women had to adhere to if they didn't want to be social outcasts. There were rules on what kinds of dress you should wear at different times of the day, how you should speak, which topics of conversation you avoid and many, many other things.



This picture from 1869 shows a group of women waiting for callers. Visiting other women in their home was an almost daily occurrence and was a chance for them to chat and gossip together.



Extracts from 'The Ladies' Book of Etiquette and Manual of Politeness' (1860)

On how to behave at a hotel:

Remember that a lady-like deportment is always modest and quiet. If you meet a friend at table, and converse, let it be in a tone of voice sufficiently loud for him to hear, but not loud enough to reach ears for which the remarks are not intended. A boisterous, loud voice, loud laughter, and bold deportment, at a hotel, are sure signs of vulgar breeding.

On how to behave at the table:

Avoid making any noise in eating, even if each meal is eaten in solitary state. It is a disgusting habit, and one not easily cured if once contracted, to make any noise with the lips when eating.

On how to behave in the street:

Never look back! It is excessively ill-bred.

On how to behave at an evening party:

Avoid crossing the room alone, and never run, even if you feel embarrassed, and wish to cross quickly.

On the etiquette of the morning call:

Never, in paying a ceremonious call, stay more than twenty minutes, or less than ten. If your hostess has several other visitors at the same time that you are in her parlour, make your visit short, that she may have more attention to bestow upon others.

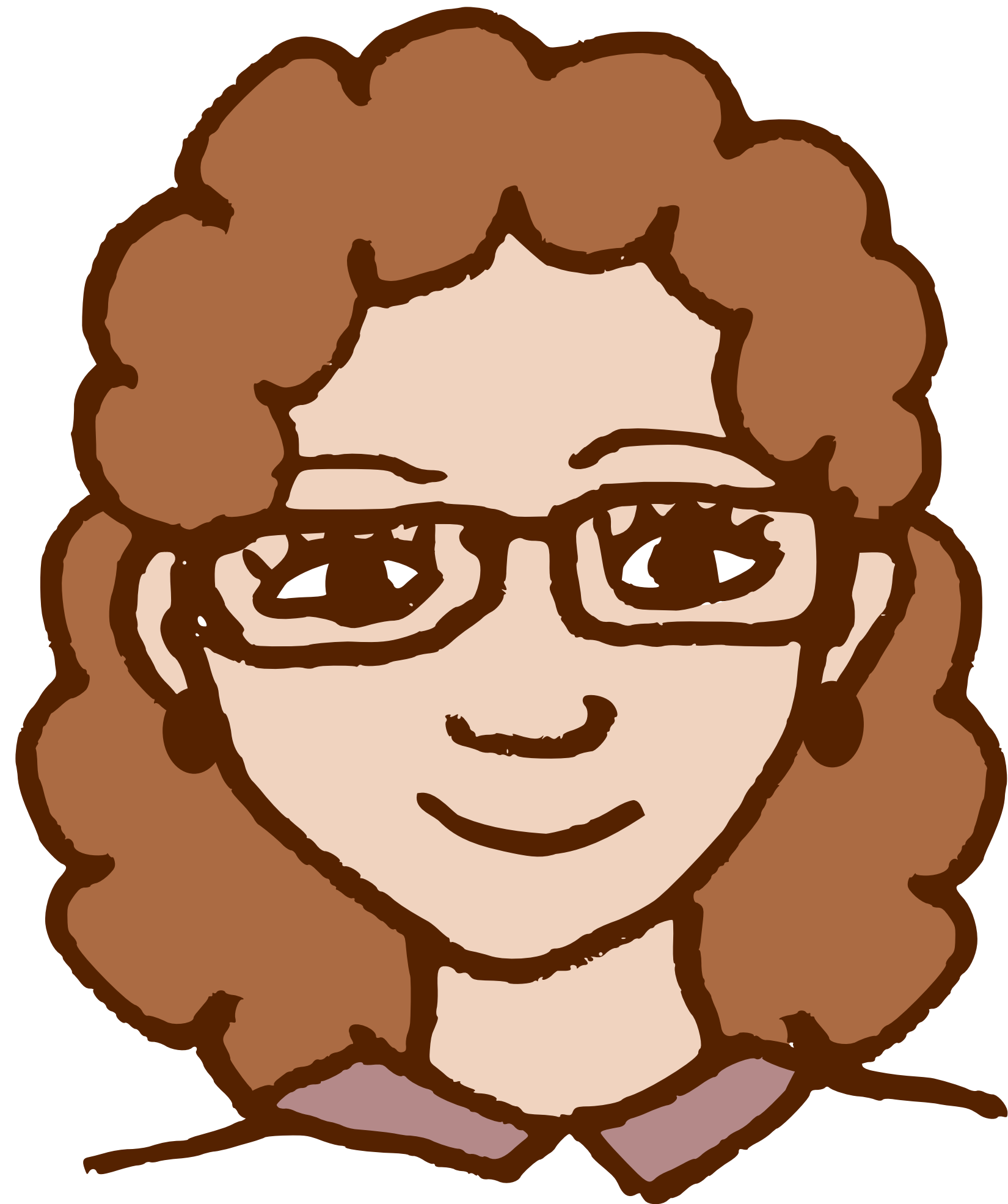


Of course, not all women enjoyed adhering to such strict social etiquette. Many Victorian women were not content with paying social calls and attending dinner parties. These women wanted a proper education and to be able to engage in the same intellectual activities as men.

There was a group that was established in the 1750s called the Blue Stocking Society in which women would gather to discuss literature and the arts. By the Victorian period, being a bluestocking had negative connotations. It was associated with women who had sacrificed being a gentle and proper lady for education.

In Victorian Britain, you could be an attractive, elegant lady or you could be an intellectual. If you wanted to be accepted in polite society, you had to at least pretend that you were not clever, at least not as clever and educated as men.

Let's think back...



What have we
found out about the role of
women between the 17th
and 19th centuries?



PLENARY

How do you think our lives would be different today if women's roles and rights were the same today as they were in the 19th century?

What inventions or achievements might not have happened?

Which famous women might we not have heard about?



How might your own life be different?