Free Love in Victorian England: Critiques of Marriage and Morality, 1825-1875

Joy Wiltenburg

In common usage the phrase "free love" often savors of tawdry promiscuity and disregard of moral standards. Particularly in nineteenth-century England, hardly anyone would have applied such an epithet to his own actions or principles, while those who used the term generally intended castigation rather than description. Yet, Victorian culture harbored throughout the century an undercurrent of moral and social criticism based on the conviction that love must be free: that the established, restrictive moral code was in fact immoral, and that social and moral progress demanded greater sexual freedom. In contrast to simple libertinism, this intellectual tradition of free love took its stand on high moral ground – it aimed not just to flout established values, but to develop a superior moral code. While individual critics sanctioned different degrees of sexual permissiveness, all condemned the restriction of sexual relations to a single, indissoluble marriage. Such limitation, they felt, not only caused personal hardship, but also sapped society's moral vigor by enforcing loveless, brutal, or hypocritical unions. Free individual choice, based on affection, seemed to them the only legitimate basis for sexual connections, marital or otherwise.

This strain of sexual radicalism developed against a background of evangelical revival and encroaching "Victorianism," and survived in muted form even under the reign of strict respectability.[1] In the early part of the century, free-love ideas intertwined with such radical causes as communitarian socialism, extreme republicanism, and early feminism. These dissident movements clashed with a powerful and ultimately successful trend toward religious, moral, and sexual restrictiveness. In the later 1840's and 1850's, with the eclipse of radical political and social agitation, ideas on sexual reform circulated more quietly. Though authorities differ on exactly when Victorian "respectability" achieved its widest sway, these middle decades of the century show a more pervasive reticence. Moreover, the later critiques of conventional morality convey a less

1. My understanding of Victorian culture here and elsewhere is indebted to Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1957). For the persistence of non-"respectable" sexual attitudes see F. Barry Smith, "Sexuality in Britain, 1800-1900: Some Suggested Revisions," pp. 182-198 in Martha Vicinus, ed., *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1977). On respectability see Peter T. Cominos, "Late-Victorian Sexual Respectability and the Social System," *International Review of Social History* 8(1963): 18-48, 216-250.

universal and activist radicalism. Early writers like the socialists Robert Owen and William Thompson tied sexual liberation into a comprehensive indictment of a social system they saw as tyrannical; later sexual radicalism split off from active reform movements, many of which – feminism, trade unionism, political "Radicalism" – had turned "respectable" in a way free love could not.

Nevertheless, sexual reform remained a deeply political, as well as personal, issue. The belief in sexual self-determination retained throughout its secularist, libertarian thrust, opposing both established religion and excessive governmental or social control over individuals. Whether rationalistic or sentimental in bias, free love combined utilitarianism – a focus on the good, happiness, or convenience of human beings in earthly life – with an overriding commitment to the claims of the individual. At the same time, free-love advocates eschewed materialistic "sensualism": greater sexual freedom would improve morals as it increased happiness; human beings would become more honest, natural, considerate, and loving. With sexual activity free to follow sincere affection, mere mercenary or brutal relationships would decline, if not disappear altogether. While they generally abandoned religious concerns, most free lovers were alive to the needs of soul and spirit, often laying stress on these needs to the exclusion of physical desires.[2]

Emerging mainly from the educated middle class, these advocates of sexual liberation both drew on and rebelled against developing middle-class moral conceptions.[3] By the end of the eighteenth century, arranged marriages and marriages of expediency could no longer command general approval.[4] Though they continued to take place, loveless and "mercenary" marriages aroused criticism from both conservatives and radicals. With the shift away from an emphasis on marriage as a practical, economic arrangement, toward increased concern with the bonds of affection among family members, many observers noted disparities between ideal and reality. For the partisans of free love, the legal arrangements governing sexual relations clashed with the ideals of emotional commitment implied by companionate marriage, even as such legal trammels violated the individual's right to independence. Many placed marriage alongside the Church and aristocratic government as an oppressive institution, tying people to an irrational and unjust social system.

2. Unlike the American free-love movement, sexual radicalism in England was almost exclusively secular – perhaps in part because of the role of the established Church in upholding moral and religious order. For American free love see Hal D. Sears, *The Sex Radicals: Free Love in High Victorian America* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1977).

3. In the context of this paper, free love is an essentially middle-class idea. The working classes, while they imbibed many middle-class ideas during the nineteenth century, held their own distinct codes of sexual ethics and practice.

4. See Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977).

Under English law at the turn of the nineteenth century, marriage was technically indissoluble. The ecclesiastical courts could offer a separation, without division of property and without possibility of remarriage. Only the exceptionally rich could obtain a full divorce with power to remarry, through the costly process of a private act of Parliament. These divorces would be granted to a husband whose wife had committed adultery; a wife had to prove adultery together with some aggravating offense such as cruelty or incest. Though the number of these parliamentary divorces was growing in the first half of the nineteenth century, the privilege of divorce remained limited to a tiny elite until 1857. The Act of that year extended divorce for adultery to the public at large – which meant primarily the middle class – on the same, sexually unequal, terms required of the aristocracy.[5]

The laws of property in marriage affected a much wider group than the laws of divorce. As a woman after marriage was legally subsumed under her husband's person, she could no longer hold property, make contracts, sue or be sued, or perform other legal acts. Children belonged legally to the father. A rich woman's property could be protected by trusts established for her use, but in general women surrendered virtually all their rights of person and property to their husbands. Not until the 1870's and 1880's did the law begin to offer women some safeguards of their earnings and property. An unhappy marriage was not only a personal misfortune: for a woman it could mean total disaster, financial, physical, and social as well as emotional.[6]

Early partisans of free love approached the issue of sexual relations from the standpoint of political radicalism. In the ferment of the 1790's, radicals like William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft advanced a secular individualism that embraced the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the political aspirations of the French Revolution. Wollstonecraft's opposition to marriage derived from her feminist principles: unjust marriage laws were part of the same oppressive social apparatus that kept women ignorant and economically dependent. Her unfinished novel, *Maria,* related the sufferings inflicted on an unfortunate wife by her tyrannical and sadistic husband; for this abused woman, "unfaithfulness" to her master was not a crime, but rather a legitimate assertion of freedom.[7] In Godwin's view, vows of fidelity stifled the individual's freedom of judgment and inquiry; embracing a single, eternal love, like embracing a single, eternal truth,

5. The act of 1857 codified the tacit requirements – adultery by the wife or adultery plus cruelty etc. by the husband – of the parliamentary divorce procedure. Between 1700 and 1857, 230 parliamentary divorces were granted, only four of them to women. In the first half of the century, divorces averaged about two per year. Within two years of passage of the 1857 act, there were 300 divorce cases pending. (David Morris, *The End of Marriage* [London: Cassell, 1971], pp. 16, 37.) See also O. R. McGregor, *Divorce in England* (London: Heinemann, 1957).

6. See Francoise Basch, *Relative Creatures* (London: Allen Lane, 1974).

7. Mary Wollstonecraft, *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1975).

would exclude growth and change. Without full freedom of choice, there could be no morality, as actions would arise not from reasoned judgment, but rather from slavish adherence to one's former views or to established conventions.[8] Godwin and Wollstonecraft never propagandized actively in the cause of free love; Godwin's ideas on marriage formed only a minor part of his complex scheme of philosophical anarchism, and Wollstonecraft generally omitted her free-love principles from her feminist writings. Still, their active personal disregard for conventional morality helped tie feminism and republicanism to sexual irregularity in the public mind.[9]

In addition to this tradition of rationalist libertarianism, free love derived support from sentimentalist, "pre-Romantic" ideas. Writers like Goethe had upheld the need for expression of the soul's longings and affinities; inner truth, for those exalted enough to feel it, took precedence over concern for society's requirements and prejudices. Similarly, for those with a spiritualist bent, mystical ideas like those of Swedenborg could encourage a search for one's spiritual soul-mate. Such inner-directed individualism, while it remained politically disreputable, made considerable strides in the literary field – influencing not only Romantic firebrands like Shelley and Byron, but also the tamer authors of sentimental novels in which love conquered all. Most Victorian novelists, by closing their tales with a convenient wedding, could avoid the potential confrontation between pursuit of love and society's rules. Typically, the handsome stranger also turned out to be the parentally-approved owner of a respectable income; marital discord never materialized in the prospective eternal honeymoon of the novel's finale. Nevertheless, the idea that love ought to play a decisive role grew progressively stronger in nineteenth-century English culture, advancing side-by-side with the Victorian reticence about physical or irregular aspects of love.[10]

The poet Shelley went further than earlier radicals in blending the rationalist, republican tradition with the Romantic enthronement of love. These two perspectives, though theoretically opposed, could meet in their demands for freedom and for sincerity. The concern of Rousseau or of Goethe for adequately expressing one's truest feelings could join with the Godwinian insistence on integrity of individual judgment, just as both could demand freedom from social constraints on action and emotion. *Queen Mab*, Shelley's manifesto of radical politics, included a strong attack on the laws of marriage:

8. William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, ed. F. E. L. Priestley (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1946).

9. See Constance Rover, *Love, Morals and the Feminists* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 11-12.

10. For discussions of some of these issues see Jenni Calder, *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1976) and Gordon Rattray Taylor, *Sex in History* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1954).

> Not even the intercourse of the sexes is exempt from the despotism of positive institution. Law pretends even to govern the indisciplinable wanderings of passion, to put fetters on the clearest deductions of reason, and by appeals to the will, to subdue the involuntary affections of our nature. Love is inevitably consequent upon the perception of loveliness. Love withers under constraint; its very essence is liberty; it is compatible neither with obedience, jealousy, nor fear . . . .
>
> A husband and wife ought to continue so long united as they love each other; any law which should bind them to cohabitation for one moment after the decay of their affection would be a most intolerable tyranny . . . .[11]

Shelley combined an appreciation of unpredictable passion with a utilitarian system of morals. Like Godwin, he determined the moral good of an act by assessing its impact on human happiness rather than its accordance with a religious or social rule. Though Shelley had little direct political influence, his combination of sentiment and rationalist philosophy found echoes in such later free-love theorists as Robert Owen and John Stuart Mill.

In 1825, William Thompson's *Appeal of One-Half the Human Race* went beyond Wollstonecraft's feminism, explicitly connecting female emancipation with greater sexual freedom as well as with wider political liberty. Repressive marriage laws interfered with all individuals' right to liberty and condemned women to perpetual slavery. Even worse than women's legal disabilities, however, were the pernicious effects of the prevailing double standard of morality. While men could transgress the official code of fidelity with relative impunity, women were held strictly to their vows on pain of utter ruin. Thompson raised a vehement protest against the advancing puritanical tide of the early nineteenth century – against the growing tendency to deny women's sexual nature as well as their political, intellectual, and economic independence:

> Not only does woman obey; the despotism of man demands another sacrifice. Woman must cast nature, or feign to cast it, from her breast. She is not permitted to appear to feel, or desire. The whole of what is called her education training her to be the instrument of man's sensual gratification, she is not permitted even to wish for any gratification for herself. She must have no desires: she must always yield, must submit as a matter of duty, not repose upon her equal for the sake of happiness: she must blush to own that she joys in his generous caresses, were such by chance ever given.[12]

11. David Lee Clark, ed., *Shelley's Prose* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954), p. 115.

12. William Thompson, *Appeal of One Half the Human Race* (New York: Source Book Press, 1970), p. 64. On Thompson generally see R. K. P. Pankhurst, *William Thompson* (London: Watts & Co., 1954).

Thompson abhorred the attempt to impose what would become the ideal of Victorian womanhood: a purity and devotion virtually without sex and without self:

> Nay, some are brutal enough to associate – and as a point of morals too! – antipathy towards their companions who presume to share unreservedly and affectionately in their enjoyments; passive endurance being in their minds the perfection of conduct in their slaves![13]

This sort of sexual despotism, according to Thompson, vitiated men's morals, encouraging them to value power over right. The whole of society suffered from the perversion at the heart of domestic life. In Thompson's view, the only full solution would be the reorganization of society on principles of equal association and cooperation. At the very least, however, full political, legal, educational, and moral equality between the sexes was essential for human happiness.

Alongside this concern for the political and ethical elements of sexual relations, a small group of Neo-Malthusian publicists approached sex from the more mundane angle of reproduction. Though their aim was generally more economic and practical than moral, and though they often denied charges of advocating freer intercourse or sexual laxity, their birth-control propaganda overlapped with free-love ideas at several points. Two of the earliest purveyors of contraceptive literature, Francis Place and Richard Carlile, joined Thompson and other early free lovers in frankly recognizing the physical sexuality of both men and women. In the 1820's Carlile – who described himself as "a bit of a prude" – asserted:

> I am of opinion that, the great preservative of chastity in this country is the dread young girls and unmarried women have of conception. No one shall persuade me but that healthy girls, after they pass the period of puberty, have an almost constant desire for copulation.[14]

Carlile *et al.* had no wish to increase the amount of illicit intercourse, but they believed that birth control could counteract the worst effects – overpopulation and poverty – of sexual intercourse both within marriage and without. To promote their utilitarian end of easing population pressure, they assaulted traditional moral standards as hypocritical, and they joined free-love radicals in deriding the attempt to impose sexual ignorance as a means of preserving virtue: chastity without choice, both groups would argue, was flimsy virtue and false morality. In the 1830's, Robert Dale Owen, son of Robert Owen, combined neo-Malthusianism with ideas of the vigorous American free-love movement. In his *Moral Physiology*, which was published in England in 1832, he upheld the unselfish and noble character of the reproductive drive when unsullied by a profligate age.[15] Though the brisk birth-control propaganda of the 1820's had

13. Thompson, *Appeal*, p. 94.
14. Peter Fryer, *The Birth Controllers* (New York: Stein & Day, 1966), p. 74.
15. Robert Dale Owen, *Moral Physiology*, 2d ed. (New York: Wright & Owen, 1831).

quieted by the 1830's, books like *Moral Physiology* and Charles Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy* (also a product of America) sold quietly throughout the middle decades of the century.[16]

Thompson, together with radicals like the feminist and socialist Anna Wheeler, had carried Wollstonecraft's call for women's rights further by exposing the oppression of morals as well as of law and economics. Such ideas travelled back and forth between the Continent and England during the 1820's and 1830's, as St.-Simonian, Fourierist, and Owenite speculations flourished and fertilized each other. The St.-Simonians sent missionaries to England in the early 1830's, campaigning for sexual equality and for their own brand of cooperative association. Though they faced charges of trying "to subvert the public morals by promulgating a theory that tended to bastardize the whole future generation,"[17] the St.-Simonians disavowed promiscuity, calling for freer divorce and fairer marriage laws. St.-Simon's followers divided on the issue of sexual morality, as in its later years the movement split between Enfantin's woman-worshipers and a less fanatical branch of the sect. Nevertheless, while the St.-Simonians failed to gain any large or coherent following in England, they offered suggestive ideas for English minds to ponder. John Stuart Mill averred that he

> honoured them most of all for what they have been most cried down for – the boldness and freedom from prejudice with which they treated the subject of family, the most important of any, and needing more fundamental alterations than remain to be made in any other great social institution, but on which scarcely any reformer has the courage to touch.[18]

One reformer who did dare to address this issue, the communitarian socialist Robert Owen, overshadowed the St.-Simonians both in the strength of his appeal and in the threat he posed to traditional moralists. Starting from the premise that character and behavior are shaped by circumstances rather than by the individual's will, Owen developed a plan for a rational, controlled environment – a community of equality and freedom – which would foster man's best moral and intellectual qualities. Through rational education and cooperative labor, inhabitants of such a community would develop a free, moral, just society. Instead of condemning and punishing human faults, Owen hoped to erase them by eliminating their causes – poverty, ignorance, and superstition. Under Owen's plan, sexual relations would be governed by reason and utility: since human beings could not control their affections, it was absurd to vow permanent

16. *Fruits of Philosophy* by Knowlton sold about 1000 copies per year between 1834 and 1876, according to Norman E. Himes, *Medical History of Contraception* (Baltimore: The Williams & Wilkins Company, 1936), p. 231.

17. R. K. P. Pankhurst, "St.-Simonism in England," *Twentieth Century* 152 (1952): 499-512, 153 (1953): 47-58, p. 501.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 511. See also R. K. P. Pankhurst, *The St.-Simonians, Mill and Carlyle* (London: Lalibela Books, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1957).

fidelity to a single person. Not only was this absurd, it was immoral; Owen could point to the common violations and abuses of marriage laws to prove that these laws were neither natural nor rational. In the New Moral World,

> Both sexes shall have equal education, rights, privileges, and personal liberty: their marriages will arise from the general sympathies of their nature, uninfluenced by artificial distinctions, and be maintained as long as rational-formed individuals can maintain them, when placed under the most favorable circumstances to foster and encourage their continuance; but no such parties, in the rational-made society, shall be forced to cohabit and live together, when it shall be ascertained, under properly devised proceedings, necessary and useful for all, that they have been compelled to lose their affections for each other – it being an essential condition of human happiness that individuals should have the power to associate with those for whom they are compelled to feel the greatest regard and affection . . .[19]

To allow this freedom and to insure their proper education, children would be cared for by the community at large. Owen, with his exclusively rationalist perspective, expected this system of sexual equality and controlled but liberal divorce to solve all the problems of love. Once people understood the rational causes for shifting affections, such evils as jealousy, anger, pretense, and inhibitions – not to mention prostitution – would be eliminated, clearing the way for full understanding between men and women.

For Owen, the greatest stumbling block in the way of rational enlightenment and sexual reform was the irrational darkness of religion. In a series of lectures delivered in 1835 and published in 1838, Owen declared marriage to be "a Satanic device of the Priesthood to place and keep mankind within their slavish superstitions, and to render them subservient to all their purposes."[20] Such attacks on the sacred provinces of religion and marriage evoked frenzied rebuttals – particularly in 1840, when the infidel Owen had been presented to the pious young Queen, and the Bishop of Exeter had alerted the House of Lords to the socialist threat. One pamphlet claimed to provide a "true exposure" of Owen – of "The dark Scenes, and midnight Revels that were carried on, in a Male and Female 'Co-operative Society'. With an Account of the Victims of Seduction and his New Moral Marriage System."[21] *Fraser's Magazine* branded Owenism as "the advocate, and its abettors the apologists, of universal and indiscriminate prostitution."[22] The result, Owen's attackers claimed, would be the total degradation of womanhood. *Fraser's* argued that Owenism could not

19. Robert Owen, *The Book of the New Moral World* (New York: G. Vale, 1845), p. 205.

20. Edward Royle, *Victorian Infidels* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974), p. 62.

21. J. F. C. Harrison, *Quest for the New Moral World* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), p. 309.

22. "Woman and the Social System," *Fraser's Magazine* 21 (1840): 689-702, p. 690.

merely be opposed or refuted like an error or heresy, but must be stamped out as flagrant immorality, a public nuisance. Even slightly more temperate critics denounced Owen's teachings as vicious and destructive:

> The whole of their writings are aimed at the overthrow of society, and all their proceedings are in opposition to every principle on which society is founded. They openly profess that their intentions are to do away with all religions, to abolish all existing arrangements and institutions of society, to do away with marriage, to destroy all single family arrangements, to have property, women and children thrown into one common stock, and to live and herd together like beasts of the field.[23]

Critics were appalled not only by Owenism's irreligion and ostensible immorality, but also by its threat to destroy the home:

> This sheltered and sequestered nook – this nursery of all that sustains, adorns, and cheers society – this nucleus, around which the faithful, the pure, the holy, the happy, may crystallise and reflect their beams over the whole surface of social existence – this depository and consumer of cares – this daily rest for the excitements and toils of the world, the wretched Socialist would explode.[24]

The bathos of *Fraser's* suggests a real fear that without the charmed circle of family life society would disintegrate. Yet, this same high ideal of familial and conjugal love often inspired free lovers to arraign a social system that seemed designed to thwart marital happiness. Such critics repeatedly challenged apologists of convention to confront a real world in which marriage was not always bliss.

This perception of domestic problems led some observers to call for more liberal divorce in the hope of preserving marriage and domestic affection, without following Owen into communitarian schemes. W. J. Fox, Unitarian editor of the *Monthly Repository,* called in 1833 for a civil marriage contract, dissoluble like other contracts at the will of the contracting parties. Like Godwin, Fox believed that vows were an absurd and immoral renunciation of one's free agency. Under the existing system, he asserted, many ill-assorted couples were forced into "wretched lives of unwilling falsehood":[25]

> In many cases parties are inexorably bound together for life by the law, and by those anomalous relics of popery the ecclesiastical courts, who are neither one flesh nor one spirit, but, morally speaking, divorced, and without affection, if they live together, living viciously.[26]

23. Royle, *Victorian Infidels,* p. 65.
24. "Woman and the Social System," p. 695.
25. W. J. Fox, "The Dissenting Marriage Question," *Monthly Repository* 7 (1833): 136-142.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

Fox attacked sexual inequalities in education and in economic and political rights as well, but reserved his deepest ire for society's inequitable moral system. Under the prevalent double standard, men were allowed practical divorce or polygamy, while women were condemned either to marital bondage or to the degradation of prostitution. Fox insisted that prostitutes were, in fact, the repudiated wives of the men who seduced them; he proposed that every seduced woman should be accorded the legal rights of a wife, as even temporary polygamy would be better than prostitution. The combination of this dictum with his belief that loveless marriages are immoral seems an oddly naive contradiction; but Fox hoped that giving the women rights would tend "to eradicate the crime."[27]

Fox's views on marriage and divorce prompted his ouster from the official Unitarian church, but most of his congregation stood by him. Like many other advocates of liberalized divorce laws, Fox suffered from domestic infelicity himself. In 1834 he formally separated from his wife and set up a new household with Eliza Flower. According to his friend Crabb Robinson, "He did not scruple to avow that though no illicit intercourse had in fact taken place between him and his friend (Miss Flower) it was merely accidental, there being nothing in their principles against their so acting – only prudence was against . . . ."[28] Like Owen, Fox disapproved of promiscuity, but felt that affection was the key to legitimate sexual relationships.

Personal experience likewise inspired the free-love speculations of John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor. Like Fox and Flower, they seem not to have committed actual adultery; however, they loved each other in spite of Taylor's marriage, and they felt victimized by stringent marriage laws.[29] In essays written to each other, unpublished at the time, they expressed their convictions on the need for love in a true marriage and on the tyranny of existing laws. Their call for a purer and yet freer morality mixed the "Victorian" etherealization of women and of sex with a utilitarianism sprung from radical rationalism.

Mill, the more cautious of the two, noted that not all mankind had the elevated refinement of "higher natures" such as they:

> If all, or even most persons, in the choice of a companion of the other sex, were led by any real aspiration towards, or sense of, the happiness which such companionship in its best shape is capable of giving to the best natures, there would never have been any reasons why law or

27. W. J. Fox, "A Letter to the Rev. _____, Unitarian Minister . . .," *Monthly Repository* 7 (1833): 347-354, p. 352. Fox's advocacy of women's rights and freer marriage laws was seconded by William B. Adams ("Junius Redivivus"), "On the Condition of Women in England," *Monthly Repository* 7 (1833): 217-231.

28. Francis E. Mineka, *The Dissidence of Dissent* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944), p. 194.

29. See Michael St. John Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1954).

> opinion should have set any limits to the most unbounded freedom of uniting and separating . . . . But . . . the law of marriage as it now exists, has been made *by* sensualists, and *for* sensualists and to *bind* sensualists.[30]

Established laws laid restrictions on the body without caring about the soul; but even on society's own terms the law was immoral:

> Surely it is wrong, wrong in every way, and on every view of morality, even the vulgar view – that there should exist any motives to marriage except the happiness which two persons who love one another feel in associating their existence . . . . [31]

> No one but a sensualist would desire to retain a merely animal connexion with a person of the other sex, unless perfectly assured of being preferred by that person, above all other persons in the world.[32]

Mill endorsed Owen's definitions of chastity – "sexual intercourse with affection" – and prostitution – "sexual intercourse without affection." He also followed the earlier socialist in suggesting that a regulated communal arrangement would improve social life and solve the problem of caring for children of separated parents. In the meantime, however, marriage should be treated like other contracts, with freedom for the parties to dissolve the bond by mutual agreement.

Taylor and Mill emphasized the importance of marriage and morals to any progress toward female emancipation. Marriage laws combined with faulty education to keep women economically dependent and thus subservient: "The indissolubility of marriage is the keystone of woman's present lot, and the whole comes down and must be reconstructed if that is removed."[33] This, of course, is part of what frightened opponents of divorce; conventional moralists as well as free-love theorists felt that social order and subordination rested on indissoluble marriage. Mill, with his republican outlook and utilitarian analysis, approved of the probable damage to the existing social hierarchy: subordination of women must be discarded with the moribund trappings of aristocratic government. Many women, Mill noted, feared to relinquish strict monogamy because it offered more status and security than the earlier polygamy. He pointed out, however, that only women's economic and legal subjection made this protection necessary. For Mill, indissoluble marriage had outlived its social, economic, and moral usefulness. If women could cease to rely on a servile union for their livelihood, marriage could become a pure bond of affection instead of a mercenary transaction and immoral power game.

30. John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill, *Essays on Sex Equality*, ed. Alice S. Rossi (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 70.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

Taylor particularly emphasized the benefits such change would bring to personal relationships and morals. In raising the condition of women, her "*purpose* would be to remove all interference with affection, or with anything which is, or which even might be supposed to be, demonstrative of affection."[34] Sexual inequalities prevented full, free, noble interactions between the sexes. In contemporary society,

> Whether nature made a difference in the nature of men and women or not, it seems now that all men, with the exception of a few lofty minded, are sensualists more or less – women on the contrary are quite exempt from this trait, however it may appear otherwise in the cases of some.[35]

Men, that is to say, were more interested in the physical aspects of sexual relationships than in the moral, intellectual, and spiritual bonds that could develop between free and equal men and women. With social, economic, legal, and political equality, women's more high-minded view of sexual relations could gain greater influence. Taylor and Mill clearly took their own relationship as an ideal, hoping to diffuse the potential for such platonic companionship at least somewhat more widely in society.

The heady atmosphere of the 1830's fostered unorthodox discussion in both politics and morals. Even *Fraser's* (under an earlier, less puritanical management than in 1840) could jocularly complain of indissoluble marriage, demanding to know what harm could come of divorce for extreme incompatibility.[36] The 1840's saw a general decline in the fortunes of radical causes, including free love. Owenism, the chief public exponent of free-love doctrines, sank under the failure of its communal efforts and suffered from growing internal dissension. A small secularist movement remained alive into the 1850's and 60's under G. J. Holyoake, but the earlier vocal criticism of marriage generally subsided into a half-hearted support for divorce.[37] St.-Simonianism was also dead or dying, and the comprehensively radical tradition of Godwin and Thompson dwindled into the narrower political focus of later Chartism. While private individuals like Mill and Taylor continued to cherish free-love ideals, few critiques of conventional morality found their way into print.

Most Victorian literature, aside from the considerable body of underground pornography, endorsed the prevailing notions of propriety. George Eliot, who entertained moderate free-love ideas, kept her novels respectable; even so, she drew criticism for an unduly sensual description of a heroine's lovely arm. In the late 1840's and 1850's, however, Pre-Raphaelite poets and painters like

34. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

35. *Ibid.*

36. "An Expostulation with the Law of Divorce," *Fraser's Magazine* 1 (1830): 427-431. For the history of *Fraser's* see Walter E. Houghton, ed., *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals*, 3 vols., (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966-79), 2:303-319.

37. Royle, *Victorian Infidels.*

Rossetti, Swinburne, and Morris did rebel against accepted standards of decency. Choosing fallen women for their heroines and venturing on more voluptuous language than conventional poets, they earned denunciations as "the fleshly school of poetry."[38] Yet, while they practiced some "free love" in their own lives and exalted the physical in their poetry, they advanced no explicit call for renovation of society's morals.

Eliot went further than the pre-Raphaelites toward integrating her ideas on sex into a social and moral philosophy. Though by no means sympathetic to sensuality or to promiscuity, Eliot observed the possible conflict between a true marriage of spirits and the legally recognized bonds of matrimony. She expressed agreement with Feuerbach, whose *Essence of Christianity* she translated in 1854:

> . . . for a marriage the bond of which is merely an external restriction, not the voluntary, contented self-restriction of love, in short, a marriage which is not spontaneously concluded, spontaneously willed, self-sufficing, is not a true marriage, and therefore not a truly moral marriage.[39]

Eliot joined earlier free-love advocates in setting a lofty moral standard for marriage: no legal or religious ceremony could fully legitimate a loveless union. Eliot herself lived for many years with G. H. Lewes, though he was separated from a wife who was still living. The pair considered this bond as fully serious, binding, and lasting as a legal marriage. In her fiction and letters, Eliot deprecated light, ephemeral unions; she could not endorse George Sand's call for a temporary bond that would in no way restrict one's liberty; but she could not morally accept the legalist or religious definitions of marriage.[40]

Eliot also joined the group of radical writers and freethinkers surrounding the *Westminster Review*, the leading organ of rationalist, utilitarian social criticism. Following the tradition of laissez-faire philosophy flowing through Herbert Spencer, the *Westminster* endorsed the view of marriage as a private contract

38. Robert W. Buchanan ("Thomas Maitland"), "The Fleshly School of Poetry," *Contemporary Review* 18(1871): 334-350. See Lionel Stevenson, *The Pre-Raphaelite Poets* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972). For the criticism of Eliot, see David Carroll, ed., *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 118-119.

39. Gordon S. Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), vol. 1, p. xiv.

40. On George Sand's reception in England, see Paul G. Blount, *George Sand and the Victorian World* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1979) and Renee Winegarten, "The Reputation of George Sand," *Encounter* 48 (1977): 30-38. French novels in general had a bad name as licentious literature, but Sand was particularly outspoken and famous. Interestingly, many of her novels (especially the most controversial, including *Lelia* and *Indiana*) were published in England in French many decades before they were translated into English. This suggests that these novels and their implicit free-love message were restricted to the educated upper and middle classes.

concerning only the parties thereto. The state, whose sole legitimate duty lay in preserving the security of its citizens, might justly demand adequate provision for offspring; beyond this, individuals should be free to contract with each other on whatever terms they chose. John Chapman, in an 1854 review, quoted approvingly from Wilhelm von Humboldt's comments on matrimony in his *Sphere and Duties of Government:*

> . . . the radical error of such a policy [enforced monogamy] appears to be, that the law *commands,* whereas such a relation cannot mould itself according to external arrangements, but depends wholly on inclination; and wherever coercion or guidance comes into collision with inclination, they divert it still further from the proper path.[41]

Love must be free; but no one should fear that promiscuity would abound or that family structure would dissolve:

> For experience frequently convinces us, that just where law has imposed no fetter, morality most surely binds; the idea of external coercion is one entirely foreign to an institution which, like matrimony, reposes only on inclination and an inward sense of duty . . . .[42]

Other secularist free-love advocates went much further than critics like Eliot and the *Westminster,* who essentially embraced conventional morality but rebelled against its legal forms. George R. Drysdale, a doctor and freethinker, published anonymously in 1854 his *Physical, Sexual, and Natural Religion* (later retitled *The Elements of Social Science*) – a book which sold unmolested throughout the century despite its frank and iconoclastic discussions of sex.[43] Drysdale's treatise combined medical information, including some advice on birth control, with a hearty endorsement of extramarital sexual activity. As a medical man and a devotee of "physical and natural religion," Drysdale insisted that the human body – both male and female – needed regular sexual exercise to preserve health and vigor. In modern society, marriage simply failed to provide adequate opportunities for such activity. Many men could not afford to marry, at least until they were many years beyond sexual maturity, while many women were never asked. Hence, according to Drysdale, countless men and women suffered from diseases of sexual origin, ranging from involuntary ejaculation to hysteria, weakness, depression, and general physical breakdown. Sexual deprivation could also lead, in both sexes, to the ruinous practice of masturbation. For Drysdale, only sex in its natural form, and infused with genuine passion, could provide proper exercise and gratification.

41. John Chapman, "The Sphere and Duties of Government," *Westminster Review* 62 (1854): 473-506, p. 485. Herbert Spencer expressed similar views in his *Social Statics* (London: John Chapman, 1951), pp. 165-166.

42. Chapman, "The Sphere and Duties of Government," p. 485.

43. Drysdale's book had reached its 12th edition and 18th thousand by 1875, and went through 35 editions between 1854 and 1904 (Himes, *Medical History of Contraception,* p. 233).

The social evils stemming from sexual restrictiveness rivaled the physical. These ills, Drysdale argued, fell even more heavily on women than on men: women were punished more severely for sexual infractions; they were so barred from other pursuits that they became especially dependent on love; and, as prostitutes, they were made to serve men's sexual needs at the cost of their own degradation. Like Mill and Thompson, Drysdale saw sexual freedom as central to women's emancipation, but he went further in relating this idea directly to their physical needs:

> If the sexual organs are to remain, as at present, totally unexercised throughout a great part, and in numberless cases, throughout the whole of life, it is impossible to give woman any real liberty; it is impossible to give her a true and genuine education, and to cultivate her bodily powers and animal passions, as they should be cultivated; and it is out of human power to make the lot of woman other than an unhappy, a diseased, and a degraded one, as it is at present, when vast quantities of the sex pass their lives as involuntary nuns, or as prostitutes.[44]

Since the restrictions on women's activities were designed to preserve the spurious virtue of chastity, Drysdale argued, "The difference in the privileges of man and woman depends essentially on the difference of their *sexual* privileges . . ."[45] Women's social disabilities, as well as many of their physical ailments, "arise from the want of definite occupation and of physical love, the two great wants in woman's life."[46]

For all his materialist bias, Drysdale approached his subject from a moral point of view as well. In the first place, of course, he saw it as immoral to undermine health by thwarting natural drives. Beyond this, however, Victorian society's strict sexual code detracted from the quality as well as the quantity of love: "The sexual disappointments and anxieties darken the whole sexual atmosphere, and have fostered the puritanism, which has of late years increased among us, and has given a sombre and painful character to all love."[47] Deprived of wholesome channels for their needs, followers of nature had to resort to sordid forms of intercourse, "where true love, honour, openness, and sense of right, are replaced by mercenary, suspicious, and heartless feelings, and the obscure sense of sin and degradation . . . ."[48] Moreover, society's ban on sexual pleasure only aggravated its preoccupation with what ought to be a moderate and reasonable desire: ". . . the very way to ensure the rank and morbid growth of the sexual passions, is to deny them any gratification."[49]

44. [George R. Drysdale], *The Elements of Social Science,* 12th ed. (London: E. Truelove, 1875), p. 175.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 181.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 335.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

Drysdale joined earlier free lovers in attacking the institution of marriage. Not only did the legal union enslave women, extracting a despicable oath of obedience and depriving them of civil rights, but it also undermined love and morality. Like Owen, Drysdale insisted that no one could either legitimately or effectively vow to restrict his affections to a single object. Society erroneously honored only a permanent love, while in reality one's early choice was often unsuitable for later life; the result, under a system of indissoluble marriage, was untold misery. Moreover, as an instrument of power and economics, marriage "has had the effect of banishing true and natural love as much as possible from our society, and substituting for it interested calculations." Loveless, mercenary marriages, of the kind fostered by the existing system, were "in reality cases of legalized prostitution . . ."[50]

In his remedy for society's sexual malaise, Drysdale combined Malthusian political economy with birth control and free love, hoping to eliminate poverty, prostitution, overpopulation, and sexual deprivation at a single blow. "Preventive sexual intercourse," with precautions to forestall conception, would allow responsible control of reproduction: people would have only as many children as they could provide for. Without fear of pregnancy, unmarried men and women would no longer have to refrain from sexual intercourse – eliminating the need for prostitutes and old maids. Love would then be available for all, not selfishly engrossed by the lucky few who had compatible mates. The limits set to population would prevent oversupply of labor and thus ensure prosperity. For Drysdale sexual liberation, not socialism or other political creeds, held the key to the problems and oppressions of Victorian society.

Drysdale resurrected strands of free-love thought that had gone underground since the 1820's and 1830's; casting them in terms of his strongly physical outlook, he struck a note that jarred with the prevailing tone of Victorian respectability. By mid-century the famous Victorian ideal of perfectly pure womanhood – vainly derided in the 1820's by critics like William Thompson – had become firmly entrenched. Even moderate free lovers like the Mills would deplore any lowering of women to man's sensual level. Drysdale sought to reinject into free love a realization that women's putative ethereal status barred them from real freedom, and to instill a sense of respect for the sensual – a belated echo of the St.-Simonian "rehabilitation of the flesh." Similarly, Drysdale joined Thompson in sanctioning casual sexual relationships as harmless sources of pleasure. Drysdale pointed up the conflict in Victorian culture between the rational, utilitarian search for "happiness" and the religious "superstition" that intervened.

Drysdale maintained close ties with English secularist circles, supporting Charles Bradlaugh and the Neo-Malthusian movement of the 1860's and 1870's. Even before their highly publicized advocacy of birth control in 1876, Bradlaugh

50. *Ibid.*, p. 357.

and Annie Besant were accused of favoring free love. Though neither actually sympathized with Drysdale's support for promiscuity, Bradlaugh caused friction among his fellow secularists by commending Drysdale's forthrightness and moral integrity. Similarly, the freethinker Lord Amberley invited scandal by putting in a good word for Drysdale, only to retract his approval in the face of thundering public criticism.[51] Opponents were quick to smear irreligion by branding Drysdale's book "the Bible of the Secularists."[52] The controversy over sexual mores split the secularist movement; and while critics erred in viewing every freethinker as a closet free lover, it is true that in England almost every free lover was a freethinker.

For conservatives this connection could seem particularly unsettling in the wake of the 1857 divorce act, which had reduced ecclesiastical control over this important province of sexual relations, even as it sparked increased discussion of marriage and its problems. The rationale for the act itself was more egalitarian than moral, as it basically extended an aristocratic privilege to society at large. At the same time, however – as conservatives pointed out – it altered the official standing of marriage as a sacred and indissoluble union. Moving away from ecclesiastical views of the institution, the act established marriage as a contract between individuals, breachable by the act of adultery (if committed by the wife). In the years following the act, the new spectacle of middle-class divorce proceedings awakened many to the hidden tensions of English domestic life.[53] At the same time, passage of a divorce act, without redress for women's loss of property and civil rights in marriage, raised questions about the morality and necessity of such legal inequities. Some, like the *Westminster Review,* came out more strongly for freedom of contract in marriage.[54] Others, like the feminist Frances Power Cobbe, criticized marriage and the double standard in the name of purity and freedom for both sexes.[55]

This increasing sensitivity to the injustice of marriage laws even led some to sympathize with the active free-love movement of the United States. In America, with its wide-open spaces and looser social structure, unconventional approaches to morality had progressed much further than in England. Many groups, religious as well as secular – Perfectionists, Mormons, Owenites, libertarians, Spiritualists, and so on – had set up communities as early as the 1830's, ignoring established moral and legal strictures and living by their own sexual codes. England seems to have received little report of these activities until the

51. Fryer, *The Birth Controllers,* pp. 123-130.

52. Arthur H. Nethercot, *The First Five Lives of Annie Besant* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 84.

53. See, e.g., R[obert] L[amb], "The Philosophy of Marriage," *Fraser's Magazine* 62 (1960): 553-569.

54. "The Laws of Marriage and Divorce," *Westminster Review* 82 (1864): 442-469.

55. [Frances Power Cobbe], "Celibacy v. Marriage," *Fraser's Magazine* 65 (1862): 228-235; Cobbe, *The Duties of Women* (Boston: Geo. H. Ellis, 1891).

1860's, when several books and articles attempted to analyze the American phenomenon in hopes of discovering lessons for English readers.

F. W. Newman, in an 1867 article, asserted that the inequality of marriage laws lay "at the bottom of the formidable movement towards 'free love' which (if we may believe report) gains strength in the United States with educated females, far beyond the limits of the few sects which openly profess it."[56] Newman warned that if legal inequities escaped reform, English women might well follow their American sisters into rebellion against such a degrading contract. This abandonment of marriage would spread from the upper classes to the lower, ". . . and if once the masses of our artisans, who have already broken with Christianity, break with the principle of legal marriage, State and Church will labour in vain to recover them."[57] The *Westminster* seconded Newman's warning that legal injustice threatened to destroy marriage as well as social order, and praised American free lovers for their courage and honesty. Free-love unions, the journal argued, reflected a "conscientious belief that it is only by such a change from the old system of legal compulsion that a check can be given to the prevailing unchastity."[58] To salvage public morality, women must be given equal rights, and divorce must become "a release for the unhappy who have discovered their mistake, instead of what it virtually is now, – a privilege for the vicious."[59]

In his *New America* (1867) and *Spiritual Wives* (1868), William Hepworth Dixon turned an analytical eye on the spiritual and philosophical aspects of American free love. While he could not condone the free lovers' sexual practices, he found their ideas puzzling and intriguing. In America, and to some extent also in Germany, he discovered highly civilized men, men of "Teutonic" culture – many "ministers of the gospel, men of thought and learning, men trained in our schools, armed with our diplomas, and actually charged with the cure of souls" – preaching and practicing various forms of free love.[60] Dixon dealt mainly with religious manifestations of sexual radicalism – a brand of free love scarcely represented in England, where religious orientation usually implied strict adherence to the established moral code. These sectarian free lovers were seeking for spiritual bonds between the sexes, and Dixon found the movements closely tied to revivalism. Like conservative critics of secularism, he saw definite links between freedom of religious speculation and sexual irregularity – especially if the speculation was carried on by females:

56. F. W. Newman, "Marriage Laws," *Fraser's* 76: 169-189; quoted in "Spiritual Wives," *Westminster* 89 (1868): 456-479, p. 469.

57. *Ibid.*

58. "Spiritual Wives," p. 474.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 476.

60. William Hepworth Dixon, *Spiritual Wives*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1868), p. 68.

> A lady who prefers to live in temporary rather than in permanent marriage with the man she loves, does not quietly submit in America to a complete exclusion from society. She asserts a right to think for herself, in the matter of wedlock as in everything else. Free love, she thinks, is a necessary sequence of free faith.[61]

Dixon ascribed the free lovers' quest to the high ideal of marriage fostered by Anglo-Saxon Protestant society. In contrast to southern Europe's casual view of marriage as a mere practical arrangement, he explained, Germanic society had come to look for deep, affectionate, spiritual bonds. Dixon's omission of France in favor of "Teutonic" races may have been due more to prejudice than to fact, but he offered a valid insight into the ties between high marital aspirations and free love.

While most writers were concentrating on legal aspects of marriage or on issues of practical morality, one eccentric thinker was developing his own mystico-scientific, philosophical type of free-love theory. James Hinton had little impact except on a small circle of devotees, but his speculations epitomized the Victorian conflict between pleasure and guilt, attempting to evade their opposition without embracing the sensual. Like Drysdale, Hinton was a medical man by profession, but he also cherished philosophical ambitions. His major works, *Life in Nature* and *The Mystery of Pain,* published in the 1860's, aimed to elucidate nature's purposes and the meaning of life and struggle. Late in his life, Hinton branched out into problems of sexual ethics, but his writings on this subject remained unpublished until after his death in 1875.

Like Drysdale, Hinton saw nature, as revealed by science, as the central guide and determinant of human life. Instead of concentrating on physical aspects of nature, however, Hinton hoped to reintegrate physical experience into its spiritual context. For too long, he felt, man's sensual and intellectual faculties had been cordoned off from each other and from his spiritual nature; to become whole, man must abandon the erroneous, one-sided view that placed these various aspects of man and nature in perpetual conflict. In fact, he felt, all interacted harmoniously in nature's divine plan. Aided by his religious Baptist upbringing, Hinton believed he had transcended the limitations of traditional Christianity to reach a fuller, mystical appreciation of the oneness and beauty of the universe.

In the realm of sexual ethics, Hinton's philosophy sought to reveal the spiritual reality of a bond too often viewed as simply sensual. For Hinton the key error of man and society, in sex as in all other pursuits, was an overriding concentration on self-gratification. True morality and happiness, Hinton argued, lay rather in service: pleasures and pains were designed by nature, not for the good or ill of individuals, but for the greater good of the universal whole. If the individual could eliminate concern for self from all his actions, pleasurable or

61. Dixon, *Spiritual Wives;* quoted in *Westminster,* "Spiritual Wives," p. 467.

painful, and instead devote them all to service of others and of nature, then no act of his could be immoral. Sexual intercourse, as means of reproduction and also as expression of love between men and women, offered opportunities for service that had been debased by the prevailing selfish and sensual outlook: "The sex relation has been perverted into a self thing, a pleasure like racing or billiards, a pastime and indulgence instead of a rapturous means to universal service."[62]

The social rules governing sexual relations – particularly those connected with marriage – were tainted by this outmoded, invalid conception. Echoing Mill, Hinton announced: "The disease is that marriage is sensual. That is what is amiss with society, and that is all. Cure that, and all is cured."[63] So-called monogamous marriage, Hinton noted, preserved sexual exclusivity for women, but not for men. As a result, while one group of women gleaned the advantages marriage could offer, the rest faced lovelessness or prostitution. Marriage subjected love to sensual and economic strictures: women were possessions rather than equal partners. Worse yet, the common scramble for property and position focused people's drives on selfish considerations and away from the ideals of service. Hinton felt that the cure for this situation must come from women, whom he saw as heroic and mysterious, more deeply attuned to "Nature" than men. If women would break the bonds of existing sexual mores by ceasing to demand exclusive faithfulness from men (he seems not to have thought much in terms of multiple partners for women), love could be unselfish and available to all: ". . . all men made able to marry, and marriage not a lottery to women: these would involve service ruling in pleasure . . . ."[64] Divorce would be available by mutual consent, and women would no longer be dependent on marriage for a livelihood.

Hinton's peculiar mixture of German-style idealist philosophy and medically-inspired worship of natural phenomena carried him far from the political bent of Mill and the libertarian critics of marriage laws. While Hinton's biological preoccupations placed him closer to Drysdale, his mysticism took "physical and natural religion" far beyond Drysdale's rationalistic conception. To the late twentieth century, his philosophical meanderings and exaltation of womanhood seem a step backward from Drysdale's startlingly "modern," matter-of-fact views. Yet his philosophy – one of a long series of Victorian attempts to reconcile science and spirit – could appeal to sex reformers of the 1890's and early 1900's (Havelock Ellis, for example) who wished to understand and adapt themselves to biology without sacrificing spiritual aspirations.

62. Mrs. Havelock [Edith] Ellis, *James Hinton: A Sketch* (London: Stanley Paul & Co., 1918), pp. 71-72. See also her *Three Modern Seers: James Hinton, Nietzsche, Edward Carpenter* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1910) and Ellice Hopkins, ed., *Life and Letters of James Hinton* (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1878).

63. Ellis, *James Hinton* p. 141.

64. James Hinton, *The Law-Breaker and the Coming of the Law* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, & Co., 1884), p. 226.

The 1870's marked the close of "mid-Victorian" culture, ushering in changes of attitudes and ideas as well as of politics and economics. The decline of mid-century prosperity, the impact of a widely extended suffrage, shifts in technology and in Britain's international standing, all contributed to a markedly different atmosphere. In the realm of sexual behavior and ideas, the Bradlaugh-Besant trial of 1876 resulted in widespread publicity for birth control, while in the 1880's the rise of what many called the "new woman" modified the terms of feminist debates. With the "late Victorian revolt" of the 1880's and 1890's, free love in England took on new and more open forms, and the climate of sexual discussion showed signs of rebellion against the staid formality or silence of earlier decades.

Mid-Victorian culture, renowned in this century chiefly for its prudery, in many ways offered an uncongenial climate for free-love aspirations. Yet, the ideals that fueled demands for freedom often shared important assumptions with the mainstream of Victorian thought. As Mill's appeal to "even the vulgar view" of morality suggests, many early and mid-Victorians had come to embrace the notion that only love was a legitimate motive for, and consecration of, marriage. As Frances Power Cobbe emphasized, ". . . the principle we all justly accept, that *marriage is needful to hallow love,* is no whit more true or binding than its converse, that *love is needful to hallow marriage.*"[65] William R. Greg, a mid-century moralist and critic, and no free lover, denounced the idea of marrying against one's true affections, since this "involves giving that to legal right which is guilty and shameful when given to anything but reciprocal affection."[66] F. D. Maurice, in lectures on social morality delivered in 1869, tried to steer a middle course between the warring "sentimentalist" and "legalist" interpretations of marriage. The former, according to Maurice, dwelt on "the fact, the undoubted fact, that without attachment between the parties who enter into it there is no true marriage,"[67] and proceeded to demand full freedom of choice in love. The legalist concentrated on the social upheaval to be expected from unions that could be dissolved at will. Maurice clearly saw the "sentimentalist," free-love position as one to be reckoned with, and he sought to reconcile the demands of love with the need for an established marital relation in society.[68] At least on an ideal level, increasing numbers of Victorians were coming to reject the idea of lifeless regulations without emotional content.

Similarly, the free lovers' concern for the moral and social impact of sexual relations meshed with the Victorian idealization of home and family as

65. Cobbe, *The Duties of Women,* p. 62.

66. W. R. Greg, *Literary and Social Judgments* (Boston: James R. Osgood & Co., 1873), p. 109.

67. Frederick Denison Maurice, *Social Morality* (London and New York: Macmillan and Co., 1893), p. 43.

68. Maurice confuses the issues a bit by opposing "sentimentalists" to "legalists," since the proponents of freedom in love included such unsentimental reasoners as Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill.

vital to both social and personal life. Maurice, for example, asserted that the trust suffusing conjugal relations formed the basis for all social interactions, spreading out to smooth the paths of economic and political life.[69] The home, in Victorian ideology, served as a necessary complement to, foundation for, and protection from the workaday, competitive world. All agreed that sexual relations were central, whether to individual character (especially a woman's, in the conventional view) or to the wider social system. Yet Victorian society, for all its idealization of love and family, sought to relegate these along with sex itself to an insulated home, hedged about with religion and duty and removed from the competitive mainstream of economic and social life.

Like twentieth-century rebels against Victorianism, nineteenth-century free lovers quickly noticed that Victorian prudery betrayed a preoccupation with sex. The Victorian age was most anxious to deny or sequester its sensual self, channeling sexual emotions into the controlled and dignified realm of home and family. The civilized individual – clean, self-sufficient, pristine in his physical isolation – preserved order, proportion, and security. To avoid a soulless collision of economic men, affection must bind these independent individuals together; a woman particularly, as the weaker vessel, should cultivate emotional dependence on a male. But it must be the affection not of disorderly passion or physical desire, but of calm, domestic esteem. Victorian English men and women would love like intelligent beings, not like beasts; would be ruled by reason, religion, and lofty sentiment, not by lower instincts. The animality tied to violence, to indiscriminate copulation, to tyranny and oppression, to the dirt and brutality of the poor and of unenlightened ages, would give way to the reign of peace, representative government, prosperous trade, sanitary sewers, and sexual continence.

Victorian proponents of free love shared such views to varying degrees, dividing particularly on the role of man's physical side in modern civilization. Mill, believing strongly in the progressive advance of reason, liberty, and refinement, could join in the general downgrading of physical love. For him, society's code itself overstressed the sensual, focusing on adultery rather than on the spiritual bonds that showed an individual's true allegiance. From this point of view, divorce was a moral necessity for couples who had ceased to love one another: otherwise the pair lived like brutes, maintaining physical ties without spiritual content. The growing acceptance of the idea that loveless marriages were immoral also provided ammunition for more radical free-love thinkers: pointing to the abuses of society, whose laws regulated cohabitation without regard for affection, critics like Drysdale could seek to exalt both sexual intercourse and affection. Most Victorian free lovers, however, skirted discussion of physical love, preferring to keep the debate on the more elevated plane of spiritual and legal issues.

69. Maurice, *Social Morality*, pp. 44 ff.

Free-love advocates joined their fellow Victorians in wrestling with the problems of the individual conscience and social duty, seeking to reconcile the pursuit of personal well-being with a nagging undercurrent of guilt. Here Victorian culture, with its uneasy balance of religious and utilitarian views, offered a confusing message: on the one hand, practical men were urged to follow their rational, economic self-interest; on the other, they were bound to subordinate their own pleasures and interest to the service of God and society. Similarly, Victorian moral precepts demanded an internalized, individual standard of duty, even as they persisted in imposing external restraints and a socially-determined code. Free-love theorists dramatized these tensions within the Victorian world, as they sought to carry rational individualism to its logical conclusions in the moral realm.

While they divided sharply on such issues as the importance of monogamy or of physical love, proponents of free love registered a common protest against excessive limitation of individual liberty, against the disabilities Victorian society imposed on women, and against the hypocrisy and cowardice they saw in the prevailing treatment of sexual issues. Sharing with their contemporaries a growing belief in the importance of love and of sexual relations in general, they also confronted the same problems of guilt and of conflicting individual and social responsibilities. Their concern for freedom of thought and action, however, warned them of the pitfalls of a social ideal that threatened to suppress sexual feelings by harnessing them to a restrictive social and economic framework. Their call for a new morality represented a radical political and moral stance drawn in large part from the very ideals – of love and of individual freedom and responsibility – that Victorian England, in theory though not in practice, was coming to embrace.