

# THE FALLEN WOMAN

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Victorian Britain is characterised by the growth of an urban industrial economy and the emergence of a dominant middle class whose identity was built on an ideal of moral respectability. The notion of female chastity was an important aspect of public morality and the differences between the 'respectable' and the 'fallen' were continually defined in an attempt to create clear social and moral boundaries. The 'fallen woman' refers to a particular kind of moral identity; neither a prostitute, nor an ideal wife and mother, it implies that the woman *had been* respectable but had dropped out of respectable society through her experience of sexual relations outside of marriage. It was precisely these women whose illegitimate babies were accepted into the Foundling Hospital in the Victorian period.

The stereotype of the 'fallen woman' recurs throughout Victorian culture in painting, literature, social investigation and religious publications. Although unmarried mothers in this period did not inevitably become outcasts and made many different arrangements to look after their children, the stereotype nearly always imagined them as abandoned and desperate, trapped in a downward spiral that included prostitution, suicide and, perhaps, infanticide.

This exhibition explores the mythology of the 'fallen woman' as it is represented in the visual arts of the period and sets these images against the life-stories told by the unmarried mothers who applied to have their babies taken into the Hospital. They do not always show and tell the truth, but they are powerful and moving and tell us much about the social and moral beliefs of the Victorians.



@FoundlingMuseum  
#fallenwoman

# A VICTORIAN IDEAL

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The roles of the ideal Victorian woman were summed up through the notion of 'woman's mission', as loyal wife, adoring mother and dutiful daughter. These roles were seen to carry great moral responsibility as the woman was regarded as the guardian of the home and of domestic and social order. Motherhood was considered the most valuable and natural component of a woman's mission; it was her greatest purpose in life and her chief source of pleasure. At the same time, a number of painters began to celebrate the Victorian ideal of motherhood in small genre pictures showing mothers and babies as an updated and everyday version of the 'Madonna and Child'.

During the first half of the nineteenth century the distinctions between the married and the unmarried were more sharply drawn. In 1836 the Marriage Act extended the definition of legal marriage to include civil ceremonies held in register offices, thus reinforcing the differences between the respectable and the non-respectable. This made the figure of the unmarried mother especially deviant and anti-social. Not only had she lost her feminine purity by having extra-marital sexual relationships, she had also abandoned her woman's mission as homemaker and obedient and companionable wife.

The figure of the 'fallen woman' thus challenged the social, moral and sexual norms of Victorian society and threatened the image of the happy family home which was regarded as the secure base for both the nation and the empire.

# FALLS

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The cause of a woman's fall from virtue was the key element of the story of the fallen woman both in Victorian art and in social investigations such as those of the Foundling Hospital. While some writers acknowledged that extreme poverty might make marriage less relevant to the lives of the poorer in society, others suggested that women fell for a variety of other social and moral reasons.

Vanity and laziness were believed to make some young women more vulnerable to seduction, and employment outside the home on the streets of the city was also believed to expose women to greater risk of 'temptation'. The life-stories told by the women who submitted petitions to the Foundling Hospital also show many incidents of violent sexual assault by men both known and unknown to them. What is almost impossible to uncover in nineteenth-century sources is female sexual desire; women could never have admitted this in official documents and it could never have been shown in mainstream Victorian culture.

# CONSEQUENCES

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The conventional narrative of the fallen woman and of unmarried mothers was of downfall and decline. Cast out by society and by their families, they are exposed to the harshest extremes of society and, maddened by shame, they are forced to abandon their babies and even to consider suicide and infanticide. It was too easy, in these circumstances, for the fallen woman to turn to prostitution as a solution to her economic need and in order to maintain her baby. Within this conservative set of beliefs, once a woman had fallen from virtue there was little chance of escape from an inevitable decline into prostitution, disease and death. While some doctors suggested that very few women who became prostitutes would survive more than two or three years, artists and writers turned to the tragic end of the fallen woman as a powerful and dramatic subject from modern life that would move their audiences and attract public attention to their work.

Clearly the mythology of the fallen woman did not describe the actual experiences of all women in the nineteenth century. Some unmarried mothers would have been supported by their families and might later have married. This is sometimes the case of the women who applied to the Foundling Hospital. There were also a number of 'rescue' organisations that worked specifically with fallen women, along with orphanages or workhouses that would take abandoned children. These were appalling choices for the women concerned and the Foundling Hospital, with its reputation for kindness and care, would have been greatly preferable in this situation.

# THE FOUNDLING HOSPITAL

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During the nineteenth century the Foundling Hospital changed its admission procedures to focus on restoring respectability to the mothers of illegitimate children. Only the appeals of women who could prove they were previously honest, sober and industrious were considered. Admission procedures became more structured and women – known as petitioners – had to negotiate a rigorous selection process before their child was admitted.

To apply, a woman had to complete a petition form and then come for an interview with a panel of male Governors. They questioned her on the information she had provided, her background, how she became pregnant and what she knew of the father's current whereabouts. The contents of the interview were recorded in the petitioner's statement. The Hospital's Enquirer subsequently investigated the woman's story to ensure its truthfulness and request references. On this evidence, the Governors made a decision as to whether the petitioner's child could be accepted. Sometimes shocking in their content, the petitions and related documents contain a wealth of information about the experiences of women considered by contemporaries to be 'fallen'.

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This room shows how artists and writers depicted the possible consequences for unmarried mothers in the Victorian period.

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THE FALLEN WOMAN main exhibition gallery is on the lower ground floor.