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Brucken, Carolyn E., M.A.

University of Delaware, 1991

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# VICTORIAN PRIVACY: AN ANALYSIS OF BEDROOMS IN AMERICAN MIDDLE-CLASS HOMES FROM 1850-1880

by

Carolyn E. Brucken

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Early American Culture

June 1991

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VICTORIAN PRIVACY: AN ANALYSIS OF BEDROOMS IN AMERICAN MIDDLE-CLASS HOMES FROM 1850-1880

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**ABSTRACT**

This thesis is a study of bedrooms within the middle-class home in America from 1850 to 1880. The purpose of the thesis is to analyze how cultural ideologies manifest themselves within private spaces and through objects. In a study of the use of space, attitudes about objects, and the appearance of objects within the bedroom, it is possible to understand how definitions of public and private were constructed within the middle-class home.

This thesis focuses on three central issues: 1) the relationship between privacy and the cultivation of a public individual, 2) how objects were used in the formation of individual, gender and class identities and 3) how privacy and the consumption of objects were interconnected in the Victorian definition of the individual. Analysis of these issues is based on a combination of subjective and objective sources including prescriptive literature, popular fiction, inventories, trade catalogues, and photographs.



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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis began with the question, "Why was there so little written about the bedroom and private spaces in the Victorian home?" There have been numerous studies of the Victorian home which offer detailed descriptions of the material conditions of the home and the ideological realities of middle-class. Public rooms, such as the parlor, have been privileged in these studies of nineteenth-century interior space. Because of its public character, these rooms have been viewed as possessing a special symbolic importance for understanding Victorian culture. However, private rooms, such as the bedroom, have been neglected within this wealth of material. When mentioned, they have been studied as either a utilitarian space or a room so set apart and divergent from the rest of the home that it must be studied independently from other rooms. This has led to analyses of the bedroom that tend to be either descriptive or anecdotal, but rarely



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ideological.[1] Although the popular image of the Victorian home might be the closed, formal and dark parlor filled with an eclectic accumulation of objects, it might not be the most accurate image for understanding Victorian culture in America.

The assumption that the idea of public and private were neatly divided in the Victorian mind is questionable. Ideas of public and private were undergoing a transition during the nineteenth century; thus, concepts of public and private were actively being redefined.[2] It is more useful to consider all rooms as interacting within an ideology of the home which was expressed through both public and private spaces. A study of bedrooms and private chambers in the Victorian household between 1850 and 1880 reveals three facts central to the construction of the definitions of public and private in the middle-class home. First, privacy was a social process of self-cultivation in which the individual internalized the

---

[1] Examples of anecdotal histories of the bedroom include Mary Eden's and Richard Carrington's The Philosophy of the Bed (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1961) and Lawrence Wright's Warm and Snug, the History of the Bed (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).

[2] Jurgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Bourgeois Public Sphere; Michell Perot, A History Of Private Life and Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, vol.1 offer good analysis of the changing ideologies of private and public in the nineteenth century. Although these models are based on European culture, I feel they are applicable to the United Sates.

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values and aspirations of middle-class culture. Second, privacy and the process of self-cultivation was orientated to a public audience. Finally, privacy and the individual were actively defined through consumption, which was both a public and private activity. By studying private spaces in the home, such as the bedroom, it is possible to construct the means by which ideologies were internalized in the practice of everyday life.

A second problem posed in the study of Victorian culture is the difficulty of speaking of a "typical" Victorian, middle-class home. Both "Victorian" and "middle-class" are loaded terms because of their association with an ideology formulated in the nineteenth century but defined by twentieth-century scholars. Indeed, the concept Victorian has often been used interchangeably to refer to a culture, a time in history (the reign of Queen Victoria), a class, a mind set, and a moral standard. Increasingly, scholars are attempting to achieve a more precise definition of Victorianism, not only for England but for America as well.

In recent scholarship, American Victorianism has been associated with the rise of a dominant middle-class. Stuart Blumin in The Emergence of the Middle-Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900 proposed a model of the middle-class based on the specific social

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criteria of 1) work 2) voluntary associations 3) family organization 4) residential location and 5) consumption.[3] Using these criteria, Blumin argues that a standard of domesticity and consumption, now defined as Victorian, was restricted to a small non-manual, middle-class whose economic opportunities led to the formation of a distinct lifestyle.[4] Although Blumin's criteria are useful in identifying a social class expressing a Victorian lifestyle, they are less effective in the study of the formation and internalization of an ideology. Although class was a central component of American Victorianism, it was not the only one.

Daniel Howe offers a contrasting view to Blumin's social model. Instead of defining Victorianism as a rationale for a social structure, Howe described Victorianism as a cultural response to modernization. He offers a warning against any easy interpretation of Victorianism, writing:

> The difficulty entailed in identifying American Victorianism neatly with particular social groups simply underscores the importance of remembering that "culture" is different from "society." American Victorianism was not the exclusive attribute of any social group within

---

[3] Stuart Blumin, The Emergence of the Middle-Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[4] Ibid., 163.

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> the United States; it was a set of cultural motifs.[5]

Using Howe's model, the concept of Victorianism can be understood as a set of cultural aspirations and values. The control of the middle-class over the print and communication medias allowed for the spread of this value system beyond a single, homogeneous social class. In fact, Howe points out that Victorian culture was heterogenous, including differences of gender and ethnicity.

In this paper, I am interested in how this ideology was chosen by an emerging middle-class to define themselves within nineteenth-century culture. To analyze this phenomenon, I have focused on the home as a site where both a social and cultural identity was formed. It is difficult to separate Victorianism from a domestic ideology. The conviction that the home and the self were intertwined was articulated by T.S. Arthur who wrote in 1856, "as our homes are, so will we in great measure be..."[6] As I will argue in the following chapters, attitudes towards domestic objects, consumption, and

---

[5] Daniel Walker Howe, "American Victorianism as a Culture," vol.27, American Quarterly (December, 1975): 517.

[6] Timothy Shay Arthur. Our Homes : Their Care and Duties, Joys and Sorrows (Philadelphia: H.C. Peck and Theo Bliss, 1856), iv.

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behavior in the home were crucial mechanisms for creating and expressing identity in the nineteenth century.

The thesis is divided into the first chapter which attempts to understand the importance of the concept of privacy in the self-conscious, middle-class home. The following chapters focus on the specific rooms of the best bedroom, spare bedroom, and servants bedrooms. In the study of the bedroom and private spaces I have attempted to draw from a wide variety of sources including inventories, photographic collections, trade catalogues and prescriptive literature.[7] My hope is that through cross analysis and linkage of different types of documentation, I will be able to reconstruct the bedroom within both rhetoric and practice.

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[7] The conclusions for the following chapters is based on the following samples. (1) I looked at a total of 17 inventories ranging from 1834 to 1896. Fourteen were used for a close, statistical analysis in chapter 2. (2) I looked at information within the furniture trade industry including 32 catalogues plus design books, bills of receipts, trade periodicals, and histories of the furniture trade written in the 19th century. (3) I also used photographs of interiors taken during the 19th century and photographs of period objects from the Winterthur Library photograph collection of objects (DAPC). (4) I looked at 40 domestic economy books published between 1850 and 1883 as well as domestic periodicals, such as Godey's Lady's Book, from the same time period. (5) last, I have studied personal narratives. These include published diaries, travel accounts, and fiction.



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## Chapter 1

## THE PRIVATIZATION OF THE VICTORIAN HOME

In the book, The Cradle of the Middle-class, the Family in Oneida County, N.Y., 1790-1865, Mary P. Ryan described a "process of privatization," a term she applied to the newly emerging middle-classes of the nineteenth century. The process of privatization is used to refer to an increased individuation characterized by the emphasis on the "self-made man," the separation of the spheres of work and home, the individualization of work, and increased laissez-faire political attitudes. [1] The move towards privatization was both a reaction to changes in the structure of work and society caused by modernization and a strategy for adapting to those changes.

Ryan, in my opinion, successfully argued that the tentative social and financial position of the middling classes at the start of the nineteenth century encouraged

[1] Mary P. Ryan, The Cradle of the Middle-class, the Family in Oneida County, N.Y., 1790-1865 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 152-154.



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the creation of a new system of values and strategies, embodied in individuation and privatization, to establish their identity as a class. what is significant about Ryan's argument is that she demonstrates how middle-class individuals actively engaged in the process of defining themselves as a class and creating an ideology that supported the survival of that class.[2] Here, I am concerned with how the social process of privatization, especially the emphasis on the individual and the private home, was reflected in the spaces and objects within the home from 1850 to 1880.

The home itself formed a prominent symbol in the formation of these values functioning as an important barrier against outside influences and as a site for socialization. Writers of domestic literature embraced the symbolic importance of the home, and the attempt to define the home according to new middle-class standards motivated their writing. The introductions of most domestic literature, like the following one by John Ware, glorified the home. Ware's rhetoric was typical:

---

[2] Ryan specifically refers to a process where the middle-class created an ideology to ensure the continuation of their class by the next generation. This ideology included an emphasis on home and domesticity where smaller families with fewer children allowed each child to receive more emotional, educational and financial attention. Thus the sons and daughters of this class were able to enter into an established position in society relatively easily.

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> Probably no four letters in the English language have so much significance and call out such deep and varied feeling as the four letters which spell that little word Home. Probably no other thing has so much to do with making man and shaping his destiny in both lives. It is the place he finds himself in when he comes into the world; it is the place he goes from when he is called out of it, and every intermediate stage, youth, manhood, age, receives from it the strongest influences and incentives.[3]

The importance given to the environment of the home was increased by the middle-class awareness that one's class or individual destiny was malleable. Control over both the environment and the individual was central to the shaping of a successful moral character. The concern for individual self-definition as part of a class identity was manifested through a emphasis on privacy and personalization of spaces in the home.[4]

Privacy was maintained in the home by two primary means: architecture and etiquette. Domestic goods also reflected a growing emphasis placed on privacy. The dominant house plan of the nineteenth century was organized into public, private and service zones.

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[3] John F. Ware, Homelife: What it is, and What it Needs (Boston: Wm.V. Spencer, Publisher, 1866), vii-viii.

[4] One of the best studies of the self-conscious molding of an American middle-class character is Karen Halttunen's Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

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Fig. 116.—ELEVATION OF HOUSE.

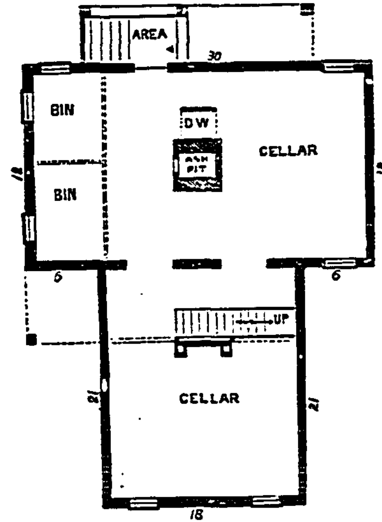

Fig. 117.—PLAN OF CELLAR.

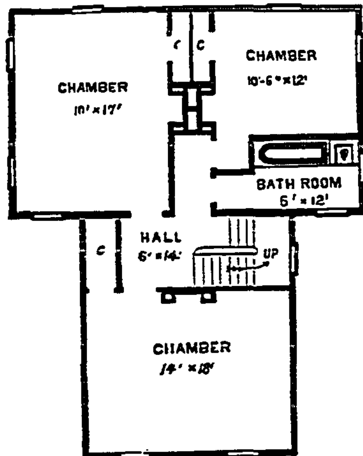

Fig. 119.—PLAN OF SECOND FLOOR.

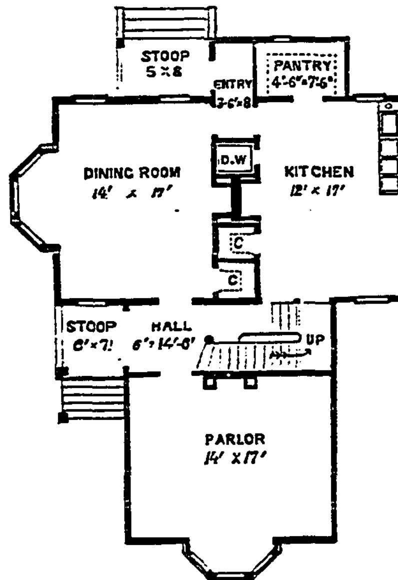

Fig. 118.—PLAN OF FIRST FLOOR.

**Figure 1.1** A House Costing $3,000. Printed in S.B. Reed's <u>House-plans for Everyone</u>. (1879)

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The service rooms included work spaces such as the kitchen, storage rooms and servant quarters. These rooms were usually clustered in the back areas of the house. Public rooms such as the parlor and dining room were arranged along the front of the house on the entrance floor. A separate floor upstairs housed the bedrooms, with the best bedroom usually arranged along the front axis as well. The removal of the bedroom to a disconnected floor increased the distance between the private rooms of the family and the public and service rooms.[5]

Stairs and halls were also used to successfully isolate different areas of the home. Back stairs, placed for servants use, helped to reduce the contact between servants and family members and guests. The back stairs also maintained a social distance for, as one author wrote, "The single pair of stairs which leads from the parlor to the kitchen would seem to separate, as it were,

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[5] For house plans published in the nineteenth century see Downing, The Architecture of Country Houses (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1850); Samuel Sloan, American Houses, a Variety of Original Designs for Rural Buildings (Philadelphia: Henry B. Ashmead, 1861); George Woodward, Woodward's Country Homes (New York: Geo. E. Woodward, 1865). For an overview of nineteenth century architectural history see Clifford Clark. Jr., The American Family Home, 1800-1960 (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

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by an unfathomable abyss, the woman above from the woman below."[6] Halls, like stairs, were also used to control access into the home. As well, they preserved the privacy of the other rooms and hid service areas from visitors eyes.[7]

Smaller architectural elements were also used to an advantage to ensure the maximum amount of privacy. Movable screens, made fashionable by the craze for Japanese and Oriental things, were used to divide and conceal space within a room. Catharine Beecher in Miss Beecher's Housekeeper and Healthkeeper even encouraged housewives to make their own movable screens which could be used to create several rooms out of one. Thus the screen would provide all the necessary architectural functions the housewife wished. As she wrote:

> the needless spaces usually devoted to kitchen, entries, halls, back-stairs, pantries, store-rooms, and closets by this method would be used in adding to the size of the large room, so variously used by day and night.[8]

---

[6] The Bazar Book of Decorum: The Care of Person, Manners, Etiquette, and Ceromonials (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1871), 231.

[7] Kenneth L. Ames, "Meaning in Artifacts: Hall Furnishings in Victorian America," Journal of Interdisciplinary History, vol.9 (Summer 1978): 28.

[8] Catharine Beecher, Miss Beecher's Housekeeper and Healthkeeper (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1873), 136-140.

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Although Catharine Beecher was more concerned with the most economical use of space, she also confirmed the importance given to the demarcation of space, even within a single room.

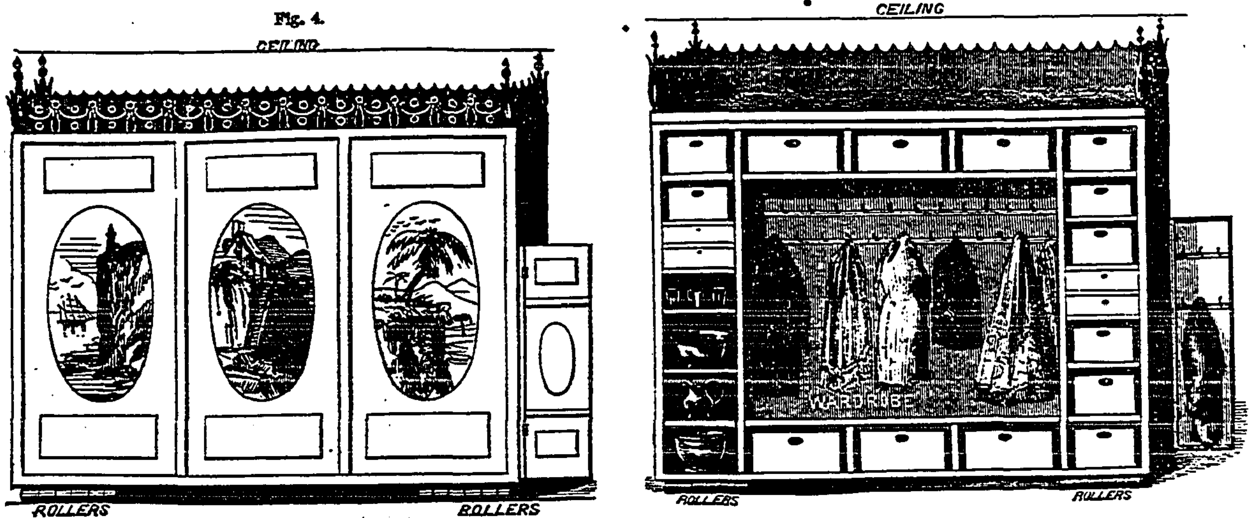


**Figure 1.2** Front and back views of a movable screen. C.E. and H.B. Stowe.

Screens, halls, and stairs, although helpful in establishing external boundaries between public and private space, were unable to prevent or protect occupants from all potential intrusions. Further, architectural divisions were only effective against encroachment from outside the home. The privacy of the individual from other family members and friends required other forms of

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protection. A strict etiquette code evolved to establish this type of protection.

Etiquette books began by warning their readers against excessive familiarity between friends and families that might result in the abuse of an individual's privacy. A well-mannered man or woman, according to the etiquette codes, did not look about, pick objects up, or otherwise exhibit any untoward curiosity on entering a friend's parlor or bedroom. The well-mannered man or woman as well never entered a room unannounced.

> There are few occasions on which it is well, on entering a house, to run directly to the chamber of your friend, and to bolt into her room without knocking; or the very instant after knocking, before she has time to desire you to enter, or to make the slightest arrangement for your reception.[9]

Excessive intimacy, as reflected in this disregard of a friend's privacy, was to be feared as it disrupted the social equilibrium. It was a breach of "the control of one's own person and affairs."[10]

One way to insure every individual's privacy was to advocate a private room for each family member, and, by mid-century, domestic literature and etiquette books were

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[9] Eliza Leslie, The Behavior Book: A Manual for Ladies, 4th ed.(Philadelphia: Willis P. Hazard, 1854),47.

[10] Handbook for Home Improvement, n.III,"How to Behave, A Pocket Manual of Republican Etiquette" (New York: Fowler and Wells, Publishers, 1867),51.

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extolling the need for private rooms. The author of Handbook for Home Improvement declared,

> Each person in a dwelling should, if possible, have a room as sacred from intrusions as the house is to the family. No child, grown to years of discretion, should be outraged by intrusion. No relation, however intimate, can justify it.[11]

As this quote reveals, the bedroom was starting to be viewed as a "sacred" room of the individual, a space where the individual was to be free from all intrusion.

The growing importance of privacy within the middle-class household was also evident in a move towards individual rooms for children. The movement from a shared room to one's own room was now a rite of adolescence, a period when women in particular were encouraged to turn inward in contemplation and set themselves apart during the rocky transition from girlhood to maturity.[12]

An analysis of inventories from 1849 to 1880 show new constellations of objects for the bedroom that reflected

---

[11] Ibid, 52.

[12] The English domestic writer, Lady Barker, described this significant transition marked by the move into a room of one's own as "the deep delight of the sense of ownership which attends the first awakening of a girl in a room of her very own... Lady (Mary Anne) Barker, The Bedroom and the Boudoir (1878; reprint in The Aesthetic Movement & Arts and Crafts Movement, ed. Peter Stansky and Rodney Shewan (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1978),31.

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the new emphasis on privacy and the individual.[13] Out of fourteen households only one desk was registered within a bedroom, yet four of the households listed bookcases and books in their bedrooms. The percentage of rooms containing books was probably higher then what the inventories reveal. Three of the inventories were auction lists which recorded no books anywhere in the house and two of the inventories were homes with separate libraries. What had changed in the nineteenth century was a higher percentage of readers due to the emergence of public libraries, lowering cost of books as a result of technological innovations in the printing industry, improvement of lighting, and a shift to reading as a solitary activity.[14] The image of a family reading out loud in the parlor circle was replaced by the individual reading alone in their private rooms.[15] Anne Douglas in

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[13] The following conclusions are based on a total of seventeen inventories ranging from 1834 to 1896. Fourteen of the inventories were used for a close statistical analysis.

[14] Donna Braden, Leisure and Entertainment in America (Dearborn, MI: Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, 1988), 78.

[15] Paintings from 1850 to the end of the century also reflect this theme with the image of a solitary, young lady reclining as she reads being a popular subject. Fredrika Bremer in her travel diary Homes of the New World, Impressions of America (reprint, New York: Negro University Press, 1968), often described herself as sitting in a private chamber reading in her spare moments.

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The Feminization of American Culture observed the increase in solitary, leisure reading among middle-class women in the nineteenth century.[16] Likewise, the increase in diary and letter writing among the leisure class reflected the new emphasis placed on private activities.

A greater change, reflected in the inventories, was the pre-dominance of mirrors within bedrooms. Only one inventory did not list the presence of a mirror within the bedroom, while the other inventories listed at least one mirror in each room. In fact, many rooms possessed an expensive free-standing mirror as well as the common toilet glass. In addition to these detached mirrors, most sets of bedroom furniture which were sold in the middle-price range included bureaus and dressing cases with attached mirrors. The size of the mirror varied considerably, according to the buyers income, from as small as 12x20" to as large as 54x20". The dominance of mirrors within this space suggest the importance of outward appearances.

The private bedroom was significant in legitimizing the privatization of the home as it provided a site for self-cultivation. Self-cultivation, the control of one's outer appearance and inner character, was

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[16] Ann Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1977),10.

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deemed vital for individual success. The dominance of mirrors, the inability to escape the awareness of one's image even in private, helped form the self-consciousness central to the formation of middle-class identity. The importance of self-control through the careful cultivation of a social image dominated the etiquette books. As one manual warned:

> You must not only be fully conscious who you are, what you are, where you are, and what you are about, but you must also have an easy and complete control of all your words and actions...[17]

The private bedroom upheld this social network and sustained the relationships within the home by providing a space, free from scrutiny, where "the individual prepared in private to confront the gaze of others."[18]

The contradiction of the American Victorian home was that while it was created to serve as a barrier to the "free approaches of the stranger"[19], it also protected one from oneself. Privacy was encouraged, but the discarding of barriers, revealing one's true self even to family members, was strongly discouraged for both men and women.

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[17] Handbook for Home Improvement,46.

[18] Michell Perot, A History of Private Life: From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War, vol.4 (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1990),486.

[19] The Bazar Book of Decorum,208.

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As Henry Lunette warned in his etiquette book, "the familiarity of domestic intercourse should never degenerate into a rude disregard for the restraints imposed by refinement."[20]

The goal of privacy was the cultivation of an individual so that s/he possessed the necessary tools for maneuvering through society successfully. How we understand the concept of privacy in the nineteenth century must reflect an awareness that in the nineteenth century privacy was orientated to a public audience. Private bedrooms provided the space where individual subjectivity, an understanding of one's social role, could be created or refined. Domestic goods played a key role in this process of middle-class self definition. The manner in which objects were arranged and used within a room was seen as expressing individual taste and personality as it conformed to the standards of culture.

As Katherine Grier wrote in her study of the Victorian parlor, habits of consumption were increasingly tied to issues of correct character.

> Increasing emphasis on the positive influence on character of rooms and personal possessions

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[20] Henry Lunettes, The American Gentleman's Guide to Politeness and Fashion (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1857), 95.

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> themselves had the effect of tying the formation of character to habits of consumption[21]

An ideology was created by which objects within the home were understood in two fundamental ways. First, domestic objects were understood as exerting a environmental, moral influence on their owners. However objects could also be interpreted as outward expressions of an inward, moral character already possessed by the owner. The significance of furniture for reflecting character was described by Downing in the following manner:

> As a smile or glance, in familiar conversation, often reveals more of the real character of a professional man than a long study of him at the pulpit or bar, so a table or chair will sometimes give us the key to the intimate tastes of those who might be inscrutable in the hieroglyphics of white walls and plain ceilings.[22]

Downing's quote reveals the nineteenth-century assumption that the more private or familiar the object, the more it revealed the real or true nature of an individual. Individual taste, however, could reflecting either the honest nature or the deceptive pretensions of a family.

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[21] Catharine C. Grier, Culture and Comfort: People, Parlors, and Upholstery, 1850-1930 (USA: the University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 7.

[22] Downing, 406.

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In the nineteenth century the home was "a thing of beauty, it is a thing of shame, as you or I shall make it."[23]

By mid-nineteenth century, the industrialized furniture industry was capable of producing large amounts of furniture at a lower cost.[24] The result was a wider span of choices available to middle-class consumers. Isabella Lucy Bird in her visit to America in 1856 commented on the scale of industry in America:

> There is a furniture establishment in Baker Street, London, that employs perhaps eighty hands, and we are rather inclined to boast of it, but we must keep silence when we hear of a factory as large as a Manchester cotton mill, five stories high, where 260 hands are constantly employed in making chairs, tables, and bedsteads.
>
> At another factory 1000 bedsteads...are completed every week.[25]

While consumers were faced with an increasing array of affordable goods that could be purchased, furniture itself

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[23] Ware, xxiv.

[24] In Robert Smith's study of rococo revival furniture, he observed that furniture production doubled in the united States during the years 1845 to 1865. Smith, "Rococo Revival Furniture, 1850-70," Antiques, vol.75 (May 1959), 471.

[25] Isabella Lucy Bird, The English Woman in America (London, 1856: reprint, Madison, Milwaukee: the University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 122, 123.

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was being standardized with choice limited to surface alterations.[26]

The move towards more personalized spaces may also be seen as a response to the standardization of middle-class furniture. The lament against the monotonous, ever-present chamber and parlor suite had become a routine complaint in domestic literature by the 1860's and 1870's when a new emphasis on creating personal and intimate spaces emerged. [27] What to our modern eyes appears as Victorian "clutter" was actually an attempt to personalize spaces dominated by mass-produced furniture. Bric-a-brac, or "litter," was viewed as a "powerful weapon in the hands of a person who knows how to make a room look comfortable."[28]

This powerful weapon was wielded by women. One of the cultural roles of the middle-class housewife was the creation of an intimate and comfortable home. Women were the main consumers, and they dominated the furnishing of the home.[29] An analysis of women and consumption,

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[26] The standardization of furniture in the nineteenth century is discussed in chapter 2.

[27] William Seale, The Tasteful Interlude: American Interiors through the Camera's Eye, 1860-1917, second ed. (Nashville, Tennessee: American Association for State and Local History, 1981), 17.

[28] Ware,6.

[29] Blumin, 185; Garrett, 56.

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however, should not be limited simply to a study of the mercantile relationship between women and consumer behavior. Popular fiction, domestic literature, and photographs also allude to a second role women had in transforming the commodities of the market-place into a familial, individualized object.

Women were considered appropriately suited for this role for two reasons: their close association with the sphere of the home and their "innate" affiliation with the higher, emotional feelings. This emotional sincerity was thought to equip a woman in influencing her children and husband's character by her manipulation of the home environment. As early as 1851, women were praised for the ability to transform a space. One early domestic manual claimed:

> in the arrangement of the house, and the introduction of ornamental furniture...there can be no doubt of the innate superiority of women. Everyone must have remarked the difference in the furnishing of a bachelor's house, and one where a lady presides; the thousand little elegances of the latter, though nothing in themselves, adding, like ciphers, prodigiously to the value of the solid articles they are appended to. [30]

Mantels and pianos were favorite spots for the arrangement of objects. Here the housewife could

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[30] A. Lady, The Young Lady's Companion, or Sketches of Life, Manners, and Morals of the Present Day (Philadelphia: H.C. Peck & Theo.Bliss, 1851), 37.

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**Figure 1.3** Photograph of a bedroom from the Smitley house. Schenectady, NY, 1903. Courtesy, the Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection.

demonstrate her taste through the artful display of family photographs, fancy needlework, and art or

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decorative objects. Figure 1.3, a photograph of a bedroom from a self-published book of the Smitley residence, shows a room that has been transformed into a personalized space.[31]

Textiles were used to create rich surfaces. The mantel has been artfully draped and then covered with a few ornamental vases and photographs. A fancy needlework cover for the ash bucket appears near the grate, and the feather dusters are picturesquely arranged near the window as evidence of the industry and taste of the housewife. Although the Smitley bedroom contained fewer ornamental objects than the parlor, the urge to personalize and refine the space was present in both the private and public rooms of the house.

The importance conferred to the feminization of surfaces remained strong throughout the period of 1850-1879 and was even reflected in the popular literature of the time. In the story "Why She Married" which appeared in Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine in 1870 the absence of this bric-a-brac was used to evoke sympathy for the heroine of the story. In the story the new wife, Madeline, is brought to her husband's home where she is met by her new in-laws. Her welcome was described as follows:

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[31] Smitley Residence, (Schenectady, New York, 1903).

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> Her aunt met her at the door, kissed her, and called her "My dear," took her up to the room which had been prepared for her (the preparation consisting of the removal of all the little superfluous ornaments which conspired to make a room look cozy and homelike...[32]

The lack of these "superfluous ornaments" was meant as an indicator of the unfriendly feelings towards the new wife. In similar stories, the placement of a new member in the household becomes a form of politics. Unwanted individuals found themselves placed in back or second-best rooms.[33]

In addition to the surface transformation of objects, the arrangement of the entire room was thought to express the individuality of its resident. Ella Church in How to Furnish a Home wrote:

> There is a strong individuality about bedrooms: and at a glance, one can tell "mother's room," where bed, easy chair, table, and other belongings are usually on a double or treble scale, as though in habit of accommodating numerous inmates, and the aesthetics of life are crowded out by homely comfort and convenience; the bachelor uncle or brother's room, furnished primarily and principally with newspapers and

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[32] Louis Tasso, "Why She Married," Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine, vol.LXXXI (1870): 56.

[33] Another example of this kind of tale was "Charlie's Wife" which appeared in the 1870 issue of Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine, vol LXXXI. Here a new wife who normally would have been placed in the "Crimson Room," the best room furnished in rosewood and maroon cloth, is placed in the plainer "Blue-Room" as a sign of her in-laws antagonism.

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> cigar boxes, and adorned with a meerschaum pipe or two, and a photograph...the young lady's room, with everything dressed in muslim flounces, and running either pink or blue; or grandmother's room, with its uncompromising four-post bedstead, old-fashioned three story bureau, and huge easy chair...The boy's room and the children's room each has a separate look of its own. [34]

Although Ella Church's description are based on stereotypical characterizations, they were stereotypes powerful within the culture, and it can be demonstrated how both style and objects were used to differentiate spaces along gender lines.

Chamber suites were a-typical as they were not given a gender identity at manufacturing. Adrian Forty in his study of design described how in the nineteenth century manufactured goods were increasingly designed according to concepts of difference. According to Forty every object, from parlor suites to knives, were identified according to male and female characteristics. This differentiation was found in all objects according to Forty.

> ...sexual differentiation of articles purely for personal use, such as combs, watches and electric razors, which are hardly likely to function as signals of gender; their design is best explained through their conformity to accepted ideas of what is proper to men or women-in other words, through notions of masculinity or femininity, which refer

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[34] Ella Rodman Church, How to Furnish a Home (New York: Appleton and Company, 1881),80-81.

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> not to biological differences but to social convention.[35]

In furniture, items within a parlor suite were also defined by gender usage with chairs designed specifically for men and women. In Figure 4 the chair to the right of the couch is described as a "lady's sewing chair." The larger chair to the left of the sofa was for men. Thus, it is surprising that trade catalogues did not advertise chamber suites along gender lines. On reason, at least for bedsteads, was that the items were intended for use by both a woman and man at the same time. However, in the case of bedsteads meant for a single user, there were no examples of "bachelor" suites, bedroom furniture for children or single bedsteads targeted towards a specific sex. Chamber furnishings were advertised only according to stylistic differences and never by gender differences.[36] Perhaps to give a chamber suite a gender characteristics would have come too close to transgressing the silence accorded to Victorian sexuality.

Information found in popular literature, however, suggests that even gender neutral objects were given a

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[35] Adrian Forty, Objects of Desire: Design and Society From Wedgewood to IBM (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986),63.

[36] This conclusion is based on an analysis of 33 trade catalogues and design books.

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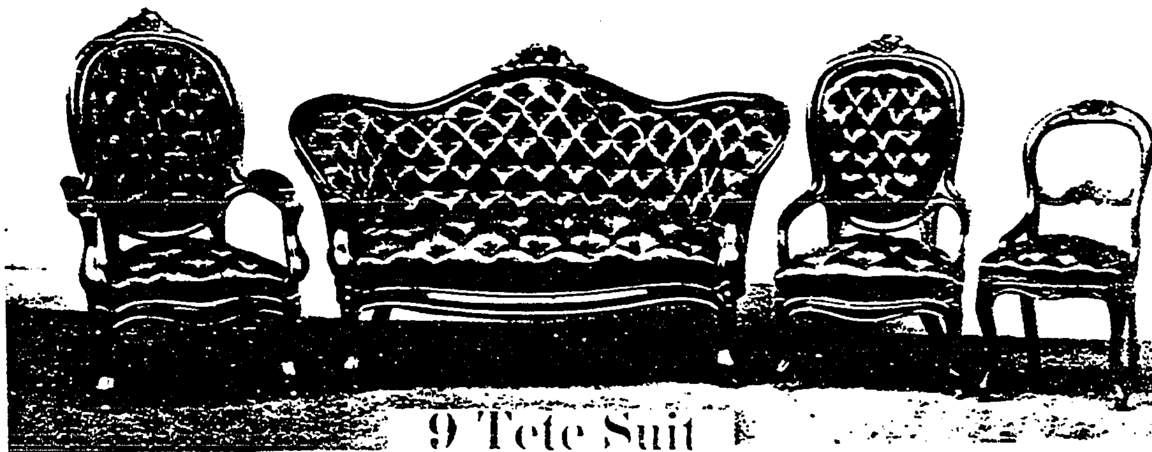


**Figure 1.4** Parlor suite advertised by F. M. Holmes & Co. (Boston, 1870). Courtesy, the Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection.

gendered identity once brought into the home. For example, Charles L. Eastlake criticized feminine taste for fabric in bedrooms writing, "in the midst of lace bed-curtains, muslim toilet covers, pink calico, and cheval glasses, one might fancy oneself in a milliner's shop."[37] One of the culprits for the dissemination of this feminine taste was advice books which frequently provided directions for improving bedroom furnishings by adding

[37] Charles L. Eastlake, Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery and Other Details, 4th ed. (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1878),201.

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muslim skirts and fabric covers. These improvements were one way objects were feminized. Incorporating fancy work items into the furnishings was another method of feminizing a room.

However, more research needs to be done to determine what objects were associated with a masculine character. Bachelor rooms can often be identified by the presence of certain items not found in either married spouses rooms or women's rooms such as spittoons, trunks, and desks.[38] As well, there also seems to be some association between the oriental style and bachelors' and boys' rooms.[39] It is possible that for men there was very little to identify with in middle-class home. Although their labor might have provided the means for the furnishing of the home, women controlled the use and appearance of these objects.

In a Godey's story titled "Salome," a woman furnishes a room for a male boarder. The room was described as follows:

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[38] This conclusion is based on references found in popular literature, domestic literature, and inventories.

[39] Suggestions of the Japanese style being associated with men includes a reference by Spofford who believed the style appropriate only for smoking-rooms or libraries (traditionally male retreats), 161; Lady Barker described entire wings of bachelor quarters in England done up in the Japanese style, 10; Louisa May Alcott in the story <u>Eight Cousins</u> has a bachelor uncle furnish a room in the Japanese style, 52, 65-67.

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> The bed and dressing table were draperied in crimson, covered with white lace. The chairs, the couch, and a trunk of Mr. Harte's, which Salome had made to appear like an ottoman, were all covered, cushioned, or draped in crimson. Before the two steps up into the window-alcove was a writing table, and on it lay Jerome's writing materials and a few books, just as he had them in his old room. On the walls hung his picture, in the corners were his brackets and little statuettes.[40]

What is interesting about this passage is the tension between Salome's attempt to decorate Mr. Harte's room property and the presence of his bachelor things. Salome has dominated the interior of the space, draping and covering the furnishings with crimson fabric, and she attempts to incorporate his masculine things-the books, writing table, and trunk- within this setting. His trunk is hidden away as an ottoman; only his writing desk appears to escape unscathed. In most cases, however, female taste dominated the room.

Two photographs from a house photograph book of Theodore Newton Vale are also useful for demonstrating visual differences between male and female rooms.[41] The first photograph (Figure 1.5) can be identified as a boy's room. The bedstead is a simplified version of the revival

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[40] Joy Vetrepont, "Salome," Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine, vol. LII (1881):353.

[41] Theodore Newton Vail, Mine Own House,(New York: Photo-Gravure Company, 1887), the Winterthur Library.

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**Figure 1.5** Bedroom from Theodore Newton Vail's house. (Roxbury, MA.) Courtesy, the Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection.

styles of the 1870-80's. The room is carpeted and has simple wallpaper frieze in the oriental style. As well, there is an oriental screen, a plain desk with pile of books on top of it, and a cane seated chair. Seen on the wall are three prints: one of horses, the middle of three street urchins, and a third depicting dogs.

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The second photograph (Figure 1.6) is a contrasting photograph showing a woman's bedroom. Here fancy work is displayed along the dressing glass and in the worked wall pockets. Surfaces are covered with fabric, chairs are upholstered, and the wallpaper is in an elaborate floral pattern. The pictures on the wall are of mother and children and other appropriately maternal themes.

In both rooms the style of furnishings, the individual objects displayed, and the manner in which surfaces were treated afforded an opportunity to individualize the bedroom. Although these rooms demonstrate a high degree of self-expression, it is important to realize that this expression moved along culturally acceptable lines. The "individuation" of the rooms reinforced cultural stereotypes of the feminine and the masculine.

The tension between these two concepts -the emphasis on individuality and conformity to a social class-underlie the process of privatization which was occurring in middle-class homes. Cultivation of the self which was made possible by the new importance of privacy attempted to balance the individual with society. In the Bazar Book of Decorum, the author emphasizes privacy "so necessary to the development of the individual character and the acquisition of modest manners" as the way to gain



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**Figure 1.6** Bedroom from Theodore Newton Vail's house. (Roxbury, MA) Courtesy, the Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection.

both individuality and acquire important social traits.[42] This balance was also expressed through consumption. For example, the emergence of a plurality of styles for bedroom furnishings created an aura of choice for the

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[42] Bazar Book of Decorum, 150.

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individual consumer, while the standardization of the type of objects appropriate for use in the bedroom ensured that the individual's choice conformed to a social standard. The next two chapters will explore these issues of consumption, individuality, and promotion of a social identity through an analysis of the space and objects of the main bedroom and the spare bedroom.

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## Chapter 2

## "COMMENCING LIFE": BEDROOM FURNISHINGS AND SOCIAL IDENITITY

The best bedroom was usually furnished at the start of married life, usually at the same time as the parlor. Nineteenth-century marriages encouraged couples to marry only when the husband was established enough in business to afford "commencing life" with a new wife. Ideally owning or renting a house was preferred over boarding at the start of marriage. Domestic manuals encouraged couples to establish independence by owning a house as soon as possible as a home would provide moral stability and domestic authority. Perhaps Fowler and De Puy in their domestic encyclopedia described the importance of the home the most strongly:

> Have some home, little if it must be, but have it and live by yourselves. There you can suit your living to your income. There you train your children in the influences which you command. There you can create and preserve a Christian



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> atmosphere which shall determine their destiny, and possibly your own.[1]

The home, as viewed by writers such as Fowler and De Puy, was not only a symbol of economic independence but also one of moral independence.

Both women and men shared in the creation of this symbolic home. By 1850 women dominated the task of choosing the furnishings. Popular fiction abounded with stories of the young fiancee faced with the all important responsibility of furnishing. Furnishing a home was represented as the first test of the young couple's housekeeping abilities; it represented a weather vane for the life to follow.[2]

In this chapter, I am specifically interested in the main bedroom occupied by the husband and wife. According to Ella Church there were two types of bedrooms found in the home. The first was a connecting suite of rooms. In addition to the bedroom, it included a combination of the following rooms: a dressing room, boudoir or study. This type of arrangement was more frequently found in wealthy households. The other type of bedroom was a single room

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[1] C.H. Fowler and W.H. De Puy, Home and Health and Home Economics: A Cyclopedia of Facts and Hints for All Departments of Home Life, Health, and Domestic Economy. (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1880), 12.

[2] Perhaps the best example of this type of fiction is "Furnishing; or Two ways of Commencing Life," Alice B. Neal (Godey's Lady's Book (1850), 299-

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that fulfilled all the functions of the suite. The one room was the most common arrangement in middle-class homes.[3]

Typically in the shared the room each spouse had their own storage piece (wardrobe, bureau, or chest of drawers) and washstand.[4] The type of objects found in the main bedroom was considerably uniform for all middle-class homes. One explanation for this uniformity was the change in the production and marketing of furniture during the nineteenth century. With the rise of retail merchants, department stores and the trade catalogue business, customers increasingly purchased pre-manufactured, standardized goods. Furthermore, manufacturers shifted to marketing co-ordinate suites of furniture instead of individual pieces.

In a 1855 article in Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine, a chamber suite was defined as follows:

> A suite of chamber furniture is generally considered to be a dressing table or bureau (which includes the mirror), chairs, small round or square table, bedstead and washstand, toilet set of china or stone ware, the last including a slop jar or foot bath.[5]

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[3] Church, 80.

[4] Based both on my inventory sample and study of prescriptive literature on the home.

[5] "Chamber Furnishing," Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine, Vol.50 (1855): 572.

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This definition of a chamber suite remained constant, although by 1878 the suite had expanded to include a rocking chair.[6] Trade catalogues diverged from the domestic literature only slightly as they included a wardrobe as well. Occasionally a rocking chair, towel rack, stand, and table were also included. In the inventories, however, wardrobes were much less common than what is implied by trade catalogues. Dressing cases appeared with even less frequency. [7] Usually these pieces were the most expensive items offered in the trade catalogue suite and would have been out of the reach of the majority of householders.[8] After either a dressing case or wardrobe, the bedstead was the most expensive item

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[6] Henry T. Williams and Mrs. C.S. Jones, Beautiful Homes, or Hints on House Furnishings (New York, 1878), In this book a suite is described as containing "seven pieces, viz: bedstead, bureau, washstand, candle stand (or small table), rocking and two side chairs (cane seated)...,"10.

[7] Unlike bureaus, dressing cases included a large plate glass mirror and relatively little storage space. The piece was organized for a person to sit before it as they dressed.

[8] For example, A.S. Herenden's catalogue of 1873 listed three dressing case suites among his options. Each of these suites contained only three pieces, instead of the usual five, and were the most expensive suites offered. A.S. Herenden, Herenden Furniture Company, Manufacturers and Dealers in Furniture of Every Description (Cleveland, Ohio, ca.1873), Elutherian Mills Historical Library.

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offered and the focus of the suite. Within the suite all the articles were ornamented in the same style.

All the bedrooms in my inventory sample contained the constellation of bedstead, washstand, bureau, looking glass, table, and chairs. However, from the inventories it is impossible to tell if these objects were purchased as a suite. However, trade receipts from the period do support the fact that consumers tended to buy at least the bedstead, washstand and chairs as a suite.[9]

While suites helped standardize bedroom furnishings, style was used to distinguish bedroom furniture and set it apart from other rooms in the home. The Family and Householder's Guide, published in 1859, listed three domestic rules: everything in its proper place, everything to its proper use, and everything in its proper time.[10] These rules reflected the belief that the objects in a room should be consistent with the use and character of that space. Thus the style of the furnishings served as a means to reflect room use.

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[9] Crosby Furniture Company, Boston, Oct. 1872 to A.P. Morse for chamber set; Lawrence, Wilde, & Hull, Boston, Nov. 1872 to A.P. Morse for chamber set; Daniels, J.E. & Co, Boston, 1858 to Mrs. Marr for chamber set; Shearer & Paine, Boston, June 1862 to Wm. Marr for chamber set. Joseph Downs Manuscript Collection, the Winterthur Library.

[10] E.G. Storke, ed., The Family and Householder's Guide (Auburn, New York, 1859), 2.

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While a wide range of styles was available to the consumer between 1850-1879, there was only a limited range of styles considered appropriate for use in the bedroom.[11] The styles of suites advertised for chamber furniture, included French, cottage, Neo-Grecian, Elizabethan, Renaissance, Japanese, Eastlake and English reform, and Queen Anne. In the first half of the nineteenth century, French, cottage and four-poster bedsteads were the dominant styles advertised and from 1850-1880 the cottage style and the revival Renaissance and Neo-Grecian styles dominated the trade literature. However, by 1870 there was a push for diversity and multiplicity of styles in the decoration of bedroom furniture. [12]

The cottage style enjoyed the longest period of popularity for bed furnishings than any other style. Andrew Jackson Downing promoted it in The Architecture of Country Houses, writing,

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[11] The concept of "appropriate" styles informs not only the prescriptive literature but is also found in the trade catalogues and manufacturing accounts. "Appropriateness," or the harmony of an object with its environment and intended use regulated the placement of furniture. For example, the Gothic style was associated with spiritual inclinations and was considered appropriate for public spaces and pianos but not for a secular space such as the bedroom.

[12] The sample is based on 32 trade catalogues from the Winterthur Library and represent the trade along the east coast and major mid-west manufacturing centers.

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> This furniture is remarkable for its combination of lightness and strength, and its essentially cottage-like character...When it is remembered that the whole set for a cottage bedroom may be had for the price of a single wardrobe in mahogany, it will be seen how comparatively cheap it is.[13]

Downing was not exaggerating the cheapness of the cottage furniture; its low cost was what made it so attractive to the middle-class. A cottage suite or French bedstead provided a neatly decorated bedstead at minimal cost. The cottage style was also popular for its idealized association with the clean wholesomeness of country life. Thus, the rubric "cottage" held two dominant associations: it could refer to a cheap, common piece of furniture or furniture associated with a pastoral romanticism.

Merchants were quick to exploit the term. Within my sample of trade catalogues alone, seven different types of cottage furniture were advertised. These included spindle (or round-cornered), common cottage, cottage, Japanese cottage, Jenny Lind, Queen Anne cottage, and French cottage! The Japanese, French, and Queen Anne cottage styles were all variations on expensive, popular styles of the time and possessed a greater degree of ornamentation and finish than what is typically defined as cottage. In these cases, the term cottage was used to simply denote a

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[13] Downing, 415.

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more affordable, smaller scaled version of an expensive style.

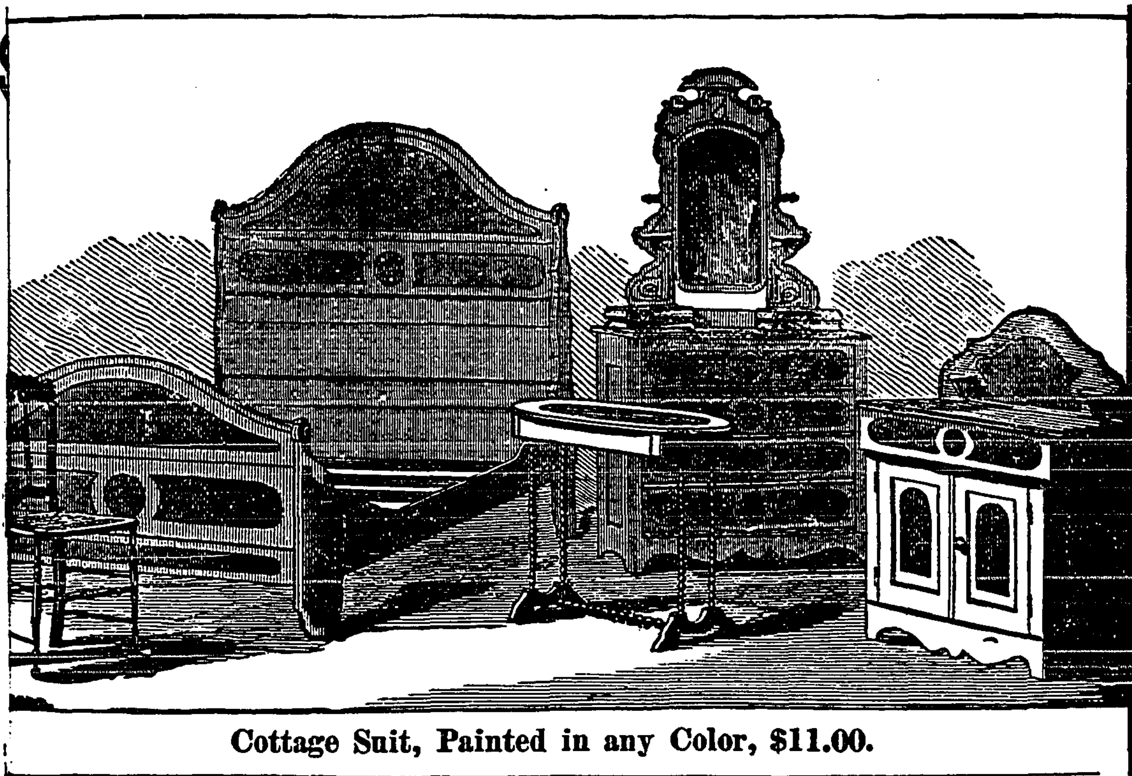

**Figure 2.1 An example of a cottage suite advertised in Coogan Brothers Illustrated Catalogue (New York 1876?).** Courtesy, the Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection.

Standard cottage furniture did share some common characteristics including the use of inferior woods,

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lower-headboards (often the same height as the footboard), simple ornamentation, and painted or enameled surfaces. The spindle cottage was the cheapest cottage style offered by the trade catalogues. Decoration consisted of turned pieces of wood used in the place of a solid headboard. The average cost for a finished bedstead of this type was only $2.50, and it was sold singularly instead of as a suite. Common cottage style was also on the end of the scale, although bedsteads in this style had a solid headboard. These bedsteads were the cheapest available, and in the inventories they are found only in secondary or servants rooms.

More commonly found in inventories and domestic literature were suites simply called cottage. These were the most frequently offered and the most popular. The average cost of a suite was $30.37 with a range in price from $11.00- $44.00. A cottage suite of this quality often was the best suite for the average middle-class family.

The most common finish for these suites were paint or enamel, although suites were also frequently stained or grained in imitation of more expensive woods. Light colors were popular, especially drab green and gray. To his customers Edward Baxter offered to finish his cottage suites in "imitation of oak (or chestnut, English oak,

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drab." Baxter charged $2.00 extra per suite for painting two panels, while the charge for graining or staining was $5.00.[14] Furniture that was meant to be painted, enameled, or stained commonly used maple, ash, birch, basswood and chestnut as the primary wood.

Although cottage may have been the most popular style for bedroom furniture in the first half of the century, by 1870 the revival styles which combined medieval and classical ornament dominated the bedrooms of the middle-class home. The antique styles, such as Elizabethan and Renaissance, were established early in the century, yet they were out of the price range of middle-class consumers. In 1850 Downing wrote

> Economically considered, Elizabethan furniture has hitherto been more expensive than any other-from the boldness and variety of carving it exhibits.[15]

The early revival styles did emphasize expensive and elaborate carving resulting in the Elizabethan and Renaissance styles being viewed as prominent symbols of status. These styles also had close associations with a past, aristocratic tradition.

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[14] Edward Baxter, Trade Price List of Edward W. Baxter & Co, Manufactures of Parlor, Chamber, and Dining Room Furniture (New York: Russell Brothers Printers, 1871-72), 3.

[15] Downing, 450.

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However, by the third quarter of the nineteenth century new technology was helping to bring these elite styles within reach of the middle-class consumer. Looking back at the end of the century on the progress of American industry, one commentator wrote:

> The extensive use of machinery in shops had the immediate effect of again changing the style of furniture. Manufacturers looked for a fashion in which they could use their facilities to the best advantage, and at the same time retain the attractiveness of their earlier work. This they found in the Renaissance, which for a number of years superseded all other styles in the best class of furniture.[16]

Domestic literature in the 1870's also praised the Renaissance and revival styles. Henry Williams and Mrs.Jones proudly claimed that

> the fancy for medieval furniture, which is the caprice of wealthy people, can be bought to impart a spacial beauty to the homestead of the more humble housekeeper...[17]

The middle-class version, although not carved, was able to imitate the complexity of ornament of the original revival styles through the use of jig and molding machines and pre-fabricated, applied ornament.

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[16] Chauncey Depew, One Hundred Years of American Commerce, 1795-1895, vol.2 (New York: D.O. Haynes & Co., 1895), 629.

[17] Williams and Jones, 18.

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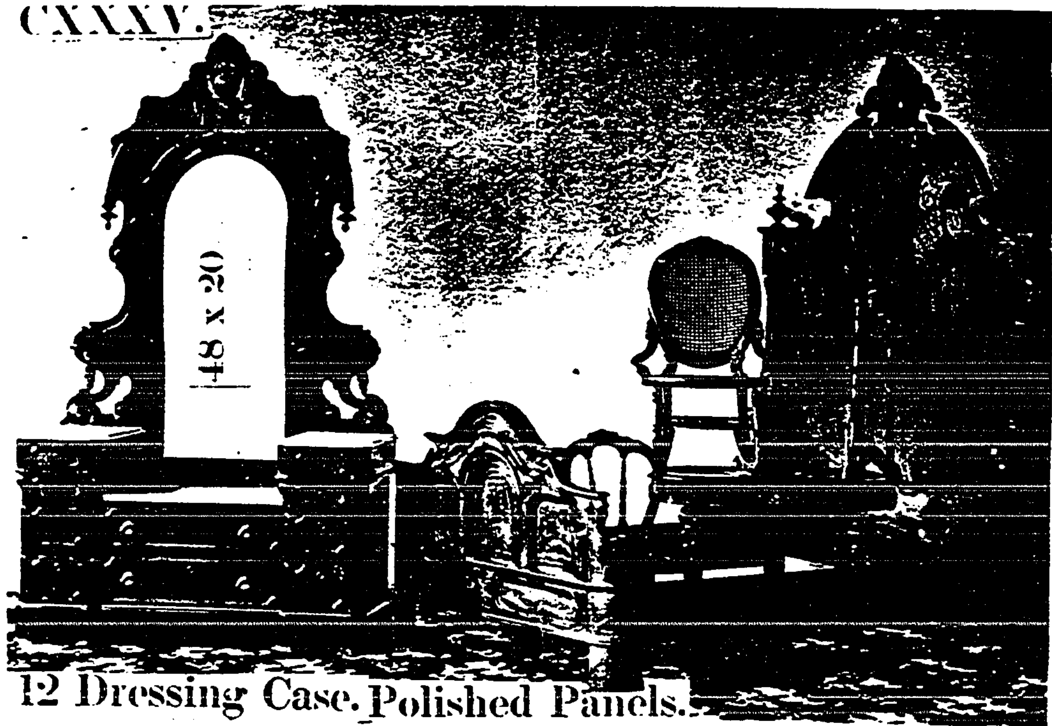


**Figure 2.2** A dressing case suite in the Renaissance style costing $175.00. (bed $50.00). F.M. Holmes <u>Catalogue and Price List</u>, 1870. Courtesy, the Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection.

As advertised in trade catalogues, the average price of a suite in this style was $104.18 with range from $16.85 to $400.00. The average for a single bedstead was $27.64, compatible to the price of an entire suite of

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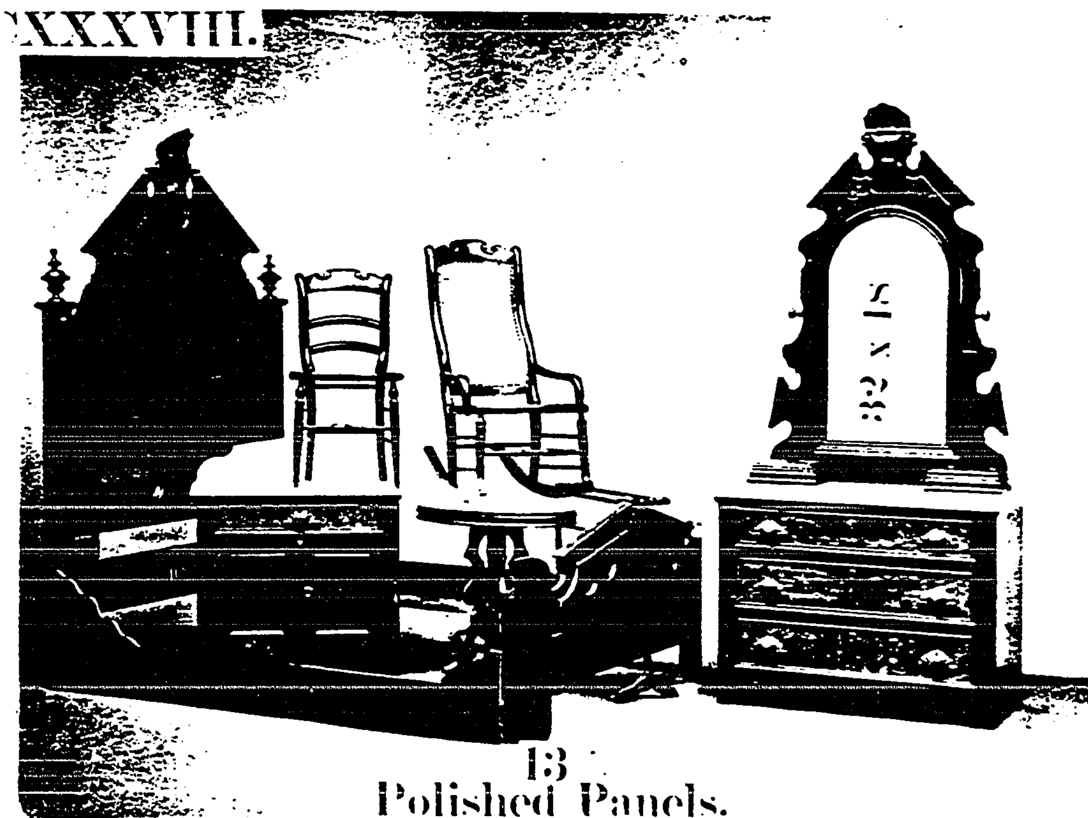


**Figure 2.3** A cheaper suite in the Renaissance style costing $95.00. (bed $20.00) F.M. Holmes <u>Catalogue and Price List</u>, 1870. Courtesy, the Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection.
furniture in the cottage style. Chamber furniture in

Renaissance style was made from walnut or black walnut, a

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wood that enjoyed prestige during the entire period.[18] The use of French veneers, polished panels, and shaped bracket rails were the most popular types of ornamentation within the Renaissance and antique styles. They were the most expensive finishing advertised and would have been inappropriate for a less elaborate style as cottage.

The Queen Anne and English reform styles were popular styles that appeared in the late 1870's and remained popular towards the end of the century. Favored by American design reformers, Queen Anne was described as

> ...severely square, with sharp corners..built in an upright and downright fashion, with no pretence and sham, the motif being solidity and compactness.[19]

Although associated with simplicity and wholesomeness, the Queen Anne was one of the more expensive styles averaging $70.00 a suit.

Although the type of objects found in the master bedroom was limited by cultural concepts of appropriateness and standardized by suites, there was

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[18] According to prices listed by trade catalogues, black walnut, Rosewood, and mahogany were the most expensive woods available. Rosewood was preferred for parlor furniture and was used only in very elite chamber furniture. Mahogany, although expensive, was less popular than walnut.

[19] Harriet Prescott Spofford, Art Decoration Applied to Furniture (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1878), 157.

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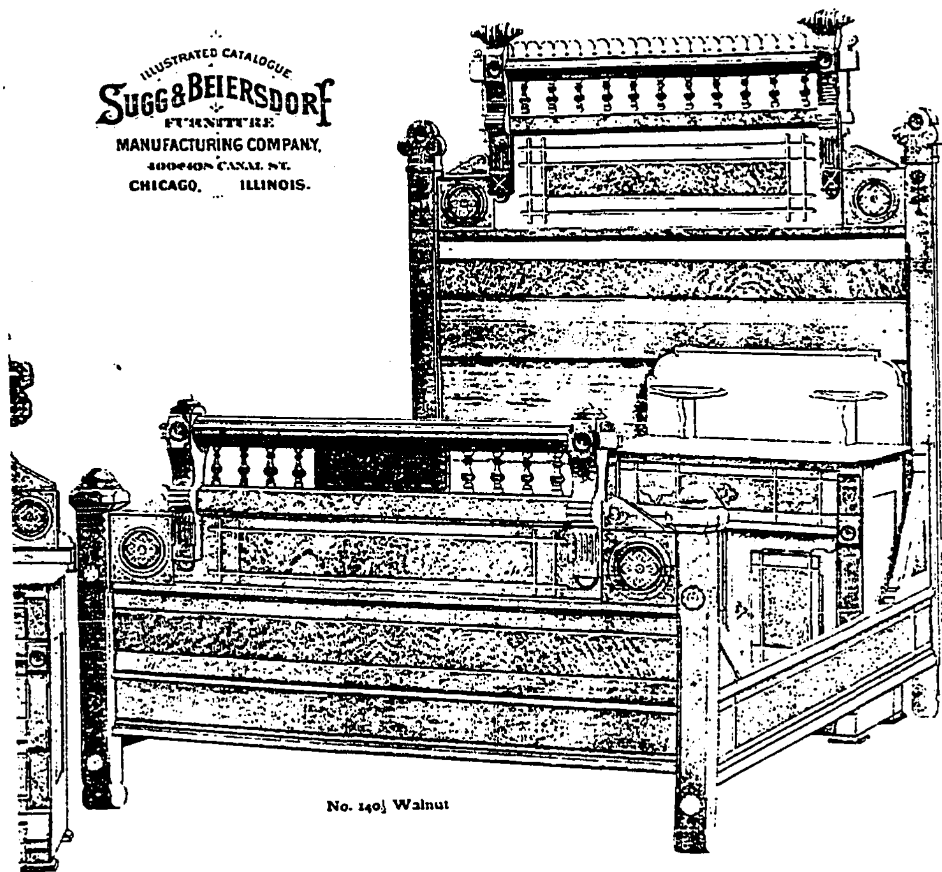


**Figure 2.4** A bedstead in the Queen Ann style. Sugg & Beiersdorf, Illustrated Catalogue. Courtesy, the Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection.

still a wide range of styles available to the consumer for the expression of individual tastes. A.S. Herendon in his 1873 catalogue even boasted that he stocked "over two hundred different styles of suites, from $20.00-

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$800.00."[20] Most of the two hundred styles were simply variations within a style achieved through surface ornament change, yet they gave the buyer the illusion of individuality.

This individuality was important as objects were used to define room use and the status of the occupant. For example, a bedroom furnished in the cottage style contained an entirely different set of assumptions about the affluence of the family, their values and aspirations than a room furnished in the Renaissance style. The concept of appropriateness, which applied both to the individual and a class, was the most important rule applied to furniture. Fitness of an object for its function and place governed the furnishing of a house and reflected the awareness of social hierarchy. Consumption practices reflected a range of assumptions about one's position in social scale.

The bedroom, often defined as either an utilitarian space or private retreat, also functioned to define the family socially and was furnished according to the occupants' best ability. After the parlor, it was the first room to receive carpets and curtains.[21] Although a

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[20] Herenden.

[21] Elisabeth Dowaghy Garrett, At Home, the American Family,1750-1870 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1990), 109.

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private space, the bedroom was as important in displaying the status of the family as the parlor.

One method to determine the importance of a space is through a comparative analysis of the value of the objects within a room. However, there are obvious problems with using monetary value as the only determinant of value. Objects in the past, as in the present, were esteemed for reasons beyond their price. Second probate inventories recorded only what the taker chose to include, and it is impossible to know what may have been omitted as being of "insignificant" value by the person making the tally. In addition, expenditure on bedrooms was affected not only by available income, but also by the number of occupants within the house at a specific time. This occupancy was dynamic and reflected changes in the family's composition. Thus, expenditure on bedrooms would also vary according to the requirements of the family. The cost of bedding was also a factor in household spending. To furnish a bed required a bed, two mattresses, sheets, blankets, a comforter or spread, pillows, and sometimes a bolster or pillow shams all which needed to be continually renewed.[22]

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[22] George Woodward in The Household: A Monthly Journal, vol. XII (1879): 244, provides a thorough description of appropriate bed furnishings. Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine also provided a complete list of typical bed furniture in the article "Bed Furniture," vol.51 (1855): 189.

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In comparison, expenditure on rooms such as the parlor was fairly static.

However, a comparative analysis of spending between the bedrooms and the best parlor is able to suggest relationships between the two rooms. As well, analysis of inventories can offer information about the type of objects found in these different rooms. A comparison between the main bedroom and the parlor is useful since both rooms were primary spaces within the home and often furnished simultaneously.

The value of the furnishings for the bedrooms in the sample of inventories ranged from $97.75 to $686.00, with an average of $180.00. In contrast, the cost of the furnishings of the parlor(s) varied from as little as $41.00 to as much as $1165.00, with an average of $378.27. On explanation for the value difference is the relative lack of luxury items in the bedroom. The expense of the bedroom was distributed between carpeting, the bedstead, and other furniture in the room.

In contrast, the parlor often contained a few outstanding items, such as a rosewood suite of parlor furniture or a piano, that constituted the majority of the expense for the room. In the book Six Hundred Dollars a Year, the wife had $298.00 to furnish her parlor. Of that

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amount, $200.00 was spent on the piano and stool alone.[23] The few luxury items associated with bedrooms were dressing cases, upholstered lounges, free-standing mirrors, and paintings. These objects were found only in the inventories belonging to the highest income range. Similarly, the appearance of objects in the bedroom listed as ornamental or decorative appear in only half of the inventories. The use of expensive decorative and ornamental objects like vases, figurines, glass, china, etc. was the main difference between the parlor and the private rooms.[24]

A 1853 auction inventory of a New York City estate illustrates the subtle distinctions between the best bedroom and the best parlor.[25] The values of the objects were not given in the catalogue; however, a very detailed description of the items in every room of the house was provided. The house itself was three stories with six bedrooms distributed on the top two floors and a front and back parlor on the ground floor. The uppermost floor of

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[23] Six Hundred a Year: A Wife's Effort at Low Living Under High Prices (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1867), 21.

[24] When a direct value comparison between the parlor and bedroom was possible, the difference in the value of furniture was slight. The sample, unfortunately, is too small to make any concise conclusions.

[25] Henry H. Leeds & Co., Catalogue of Genteel Furniture, For Sale at Auction, by Henry H. Leeds & Co., on Friday, April 29th, 1853 , the Winterthur Library.

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rooms contained the lesser quality bedrooms. They were carpeted with ingrain carpet and furnished with painted and cottage furniture. There are no references to wardrobes, dressing pieces or other expensive items in these rooms.

The best bedroom was on the second floor, and it was a suite of two rooms. The side room contained a black walnut bedstead and bedding, while the adjoining front room contained a black walnut, marble-top dress bureau and washstand, and corner etagere; a lounge, sewing arm chair and large arm chair covered in green brocatelle; a black walnut side table; and four imitation rosewood cottage chairs. The front parlor is the most elaborate room downstairs. Among the objects catalogued were a "rich carved" rosewood sofa in crimson plush, a rosewood, marble-top etagere, sofa table, ormolu candelabra, two oil paintings, and a gilt framed oval mirror. Both the best room and the parlor contain luxury items as upholstered furniture, but the parlor contained more purely decorative items such as candelabra and oil paintings.

Jurgen Habermas has argued that as the family lost many of its productive and social functions in the nineteenth century, its scope shrunk to "a community of consumers."[26] The purchase and display of objects became

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[26] Habermas, 156.

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the available mechanism for self-definition. The importance of consumption in creating a social identity is revealed by the fact that furnishing or re-furnishing was only commenced at the start of life or at the moment when a couple found themselves in a new social position.

Once consumption becomes closely linked to individual identity in this way, it is clear that it would regulate consumption behavior throughout the house and not just in the public areas. Again, the concepts of public and private, social and familial are fluid. While this chapter has focused on how the style of furnishing in the privacy of the main bedroom helped establish the social identity of a husband and wife, the next two chapters analyze rooms that clearly manifested both public and private characteristics.

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## Chapter 3

## THE SPARE BEDROOM: THE PRESENTATION OF THE SELF AND MIDDLE-CLASS RESPECTABILITY

This chapter focuses on the spare bedroom which in many ways can be used to represent the emergence of a middle-class culture in the period from 1850 to 1879. As a space, the spare bedroom was symbolically linked to the social aspirations and lifestyles of this class. Like the parlor, the spare bedroom was also an important site where the family presented themselves to others.

Previous to the nineteenth century most middle-class homes did not have a spare bedroom, in the sense of a specific room set aside only for occasional use by guests. Even in the nineteenth century, sources of documentation for the spare bedroom are elusive. It is in prescriptive literature (home and advice books), fictional narratives, periodicals, and memoirs where references to the spare bedroom are found. Within these sources, however, there



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is implied a wide spread occurrence of spare bedrooms within the middle-class home.[1]

Unfortunately, these are all highly subjective sources and can not be used to accurately record use. To further the problem, trade catalogues advertised "chamber suites" without specifying to which chamber in the house they belonged. Likewise, inventories and architectural plans did not differentiate between the different types of chambers within the home. Both of these facts make it difficult to determine exactly the type of furnishings in use in the spare bedroom.

One explanation for the difficulty in locating the spare bedroom within period documentation was the fluidity of the space. An anonymous article published at the end of the century described the many transformations of their spare bedroom.

> We had a spare bedroom at first. When the baby came, we turned it into a nursery. We cleared out a store-room for the nurse, and used a little back-room for a drying room. Grandmother, when her first baby came, took it into her own bed. When another baby came there was the trundle-bed that stood under the big bed all day and rolled out at night with a sleepy rumble. And when more babies still came to crowd the trundle-bed, the first baby, a big

[1] For example, spare chambers were common enough for Caroline Howard King to claim, "every house had its spare chamber, a room dedicated to the guests of the house (the staying company)..." Caroline Howard King, <u>When I Lived in Salem, 1822-1866</u> (Brattleboro, Vermont: Stephen Daye Press, 1937), 184.

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> boy, six years old now, had a bed made for him at the head of the back stairs, or up garret, under the sloping leaves.[2]

After the children had grown, no doubt the family regained their spare bedroom. However, the tale enforces the idea that unlike other spaces in the home, the spare bedroom was not fixed but changed according to the needs of the family. Thus, the occurrence of the spare bedroom was highly individualistic, although most likely common. However, despite the lack of documentation in inventories and house plans, the prescriptive literature does provide interesting insights into the relationship between the spare bedroom and the middle-class.

In 1856 Timothy Shay Arthur published a collection of moralistic tales, cloaked as domestic lessons, in Our Homes: Their Cares and Duties, Joys and Sorrows.[3] One of these tales was "The Spare-Bedroom," and it told the story of a married couple who lost a fortune because they lacked a spare bedroom. The story begins with Mrs. Edward Tracy who "trained in a good school of domestic management and family economy...did not approve of spare bedrooms."[4]

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[2] Anonymous, "The Passing of the Spare Bedroom," Atlantic Monthly, v.83 (January, 1899):140.

[3] Timothy Shay Arthur, Our Homes: Their Cares and Duties, Joys and Sorrows (Philadelphia: H.C. Peck and Theo Bliss, 1856).

[4] Ibid.,125.

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Mrs. Tracy believed that their spare bedroom encouraged little-known acquaintances and relatives to spend a few days at the Tracy's expense. Lamenting that their home was becoming a common lodging inn, Mrs. Tracy replaced her spare bedroom and, as a result, was no longer bothered by unwelcome guests. The story ends with the surprise visit of an elderly aunt. Turned away by the lack of a spare bedroom, the aunt in anger decided not to bestow the fortune she had traveled so far to bequeath them. The moral of the tale is that the Tracy's lack of hospitality cost them both wealth and friends.

The spare bedroom in this story was used to represent issues of hospitality, social expectations, and attitudes toward the home. The story was written during a transitional point in the conception of the home. By mid nineteenth century the ideology of the home as a retreat was gaining popularity. However, the increase in cheaper and more reliable forms of transportation was creating a more mobile middle-class.[5] Whereas frequent travel had previously been a privilege of the elite classes, by mid-century the middle-class could afford the same luxury. Families were also becoming more widely dispersed with sons frequently boarding at schools or moving into the cities for jobs. This created more frequent movement

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[5] Braden, 289, 290.

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between families and facilitated the need for a space in the home to accommodate guests.

Etiquette books helped to smooth the conflict between the home as a private retreat and the increased contact with strangers and guests. Complex sets of rules were proposed to help guests and hosts interact while maintaining the privacy and dignity of each. as the anonymous author of the Bazar Book of Decorum (1871) wrote:

> It would seem to be the object of modern fashion to interpose as many formalities as possible between the members of society, in order to prevent intimacy of contact. Thus, perhaps, is a necessary result of the immense expansion of the great cities, and the consequent widening of the social relation. It would be manifestly impossible, if every fashionable acquaintance became an intimate friend, and thus entitled to the freedom of familiarity, to retain any of that personal reserve which is essential to self-respect.[6]

Etiquette, architecture and the division of the house were used to control the nature of contact in the home and make the transition between the private and public easier.

Unlike the master bedroom, the spare bedroom was routinely opened to the public. When the family formally entertained, etiquette books recommended that visitors be escorted on arrival to the spare bedroom or dressing room

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[6] Bazar Book of Decorum, 238.

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before entrance into the parlor or reception room. The following procedure was recommended:

> The domestic that attends the door should be instructed to show the guest upstairs, as soon as she arrives; conducting her to an unoccupied apartment, where she may take off her bonnet, and arrange her hair, or any part of her dress that may require change or improvement. The lady should than be left to herself. Nothing is polite that can possibly incommode or embarrass-therefore, it is mistaken civility for the hostess, or some female member of the family to follow the visitor upstairs, and remain with her all the time she is preparing for her appearance in the parlor.[7]

Thus, the spare bedroom may be functionally linked to the hall in its purpose as a buffer zone where individuals prepared their social self.

By escorting visitors to the spare chamber first, the need for a transition, and a transitional space, between the realms of the public and private was stressed. As Karen Halttunen observed,

> The many ceremonial rules governing parlor entrances and exits were designed to reinforce the crucial social distinction between that region of the house-the parlor and its environs-where the laws of gentility were in force, and those regions-the hall, the stairway, and the dressing rooms-where those laws were relaxed.[8]

I would argue that, although the laws of gentility were relaxed in spaces such as the hall and the dressing room, they were still present. The spare bedroom offered a

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[7] Leslie,15.

[8] Halttunen, 104.

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private space where the individual could be assured of their conformity to the codes of gentility. While the private room was conceived as a place for self-cultivation, the spare bedroom was used as a site to prepare outward surfaces.

The spare bedroom was also significant as it was a public space where the family presented themselves to others. Ideologically, the spare bedroom may also be linked to the parlor. In fact, the same language was used to reform critics who describe both rooms as stiff, formal, and unapproachable. In describing her family's spare chamber, Caroline King wrote:

> ...the furniture was placed with great regularity and exactness against the sides of the room. Not a pin was ever out of place on the frilled white pincushion on the bureau, while everything was of immaculate cleanliness. The housewife's finest and softest damask napery was displayed on the large mahogany towel horse by the side of the washstand.[9]

The spare bedroom often was the place where the family's finest furniture and objects were displayed. Sometimes the spare bedroom was even equal to or eclipsed the master bedroom in its finery.[10]

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[9] King, 184.

[10] Miss Leslie in The Housebook, or a Manual of Domestic Economy for Town and Country wrote, "it is customary to have the two principal bedrooms furnished equally well; the second being usually appropriate to visitors," 296.

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The spare bedroom was often furnished elaborately as it reflected the social status or aspirations of a family. The author of Six Hundred Dollars a Year, a Wife's Effort at Low Living under High Prices described a neighbor whose spare bedroom was elegantly furnished at the comfort of the two sisters.

> Once when Mrs. Adley was ill, I was sent for to see her, and I went up into her chamber,- a poorly furnished room, with the commonest wooden-bottomed chairs,a coarse straw bed, and no carpet on the cold floor. I was surprised to see it, for the grand appearance of everything downstairs, did not correspond with the poverty displayed above. I caught a glimpse of the large front bedroom, however, and there saw that things were in quite a different style. A large and massive walnut bedstead, with carved headboard, a handsome dressing-table to match, with all the other belongings of an elegant chamber,a rich carpet also covering the floor. This was the sate chamber into which company were shown; but it was kept shut up on all other occasions, as too good to use.[11]

In this story, the appearance of middle-class affluence, demonstrated by the grand furnishings of the parlor and spare bedroom, was more important than the family's basic needs. Inventories of the lower middle-class suggest that when a family could afford only to expensively furnish one or perhaps two rooms in the house, the parlor was given priority. It is only among the affluent middle-class that a family could support multiple rooms furnished well.

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[11] Six Hundred Dollars a Year. a Wife's Effort at Low Living Under High Prices (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1867), 82.

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Since guests rarely ventured past the veneer of the public spaces, the illusion of wealth could easily be maintained by a few rooms.

In a Godey's story published only four years after the T.S. Arthur tale, the spare bedroom had come to represent the conceit of the middle-class rather than its hospitality.

> All Plumville arranged their houses much after this fashion. They had their "front room"-unopened more than once or twice a month, on the occasion of a solemn tea-drinking or a formal call from the minister-and the spare bedroom was a matter of necessity, a stereotyped appendage to gentility.[12]

The story establishes an overt connection between the spare bedroom, one's social position, and acceptability. Here the spare bedroom is a public mark of a family's affluence. When Mrs. Bowen threatens to turn the spare bedroom into a comfortable room for grandmother, her husband protests, claiming, "Nobody that is anybody lives without a spare bedroom. Why what would folks say? They'd think my business was running down right off."[13]

Stories like "Mrs. Bowen's Parlor and Spare Bedroom" and Arthur's "The Spare-Bedroom" suggest that the spare bedroom provided an appropriate symbol of middle-class

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[12] "Alice B. Haven, "Mrs. Bowen's Parlor and Spare-Bedroom," <u>Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine</u> ,vol.LXI (1860), 136.

[13] Haven, 137.

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cultural values and aspirations. The spare bedroom represented goals of leisure (in the ability to travel and entertain) and the affluence to maintain an unused space within the home. It typified what Veblen identified as pecuniary emulation where the accumulation of leisure goods represented success. In his criticism of nineteenth-century culture, Veblen wrote about the nineteenth-century conception of property:

> Its possession in some amount becomes necessary in order to have any reputable standing in the community. It becomes indispensable to accumulate, to acquire property in order to retain one's good name.[14]

At the time, the spare bedroom was useful in representing this idea. Further, the spare bedroom was important in its conception not only for the status it represented, but as a place where public and private met.

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[14] Thorstein Veblen, The Theory of the Leisure Class (USA: Mentor Books, 1953), 37.

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## Chapter 4

## THE WOMAN BELOW THE STAIRS: SERVANT QUARTERS IN THE MIDDLE-CLASS HOUSEHOLD

Previous chapters have studied the dominant spaces in the house (master bedroom, spare bedroom, and parlor) and the manner in which these spaces and objects were manipulated to establish both class and individual identities. Up to this point I have concentrated on only those rooms that actively supported the domestic ideology of the middle-class. To leave the study of the Victorian home here would create a false impression of the home, one that smoothed over the conflicts and contradictions present in the establishment of a domestic ideology. In this chapter, I will analyze an interior space usually excluded in the study of domestic ideology, the servant's room. The presence of female servants within the middle-class home exposed the limits of the middle-class ideal.

The domestic servant was a prominent symbol of middle-class status. Even those in the lower ranks of the



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middle-class viewed the employment of a servant as an obtainable status symbol. One writer in describing the trials of a housekeeper attempting to economize claimed,

> Humble as was our position in the great world, we had a certain status to maintain. We must live in a respectable house, we must dress genteelly at the least, and keep a servant, too.[1]

In 1860, over 600,000 women were employed in domestic service, representing 7% of the total labor population. By 1870, this percentage had risen to 8%.[2] Previous to the nineteenth century, the employment of servants had been the privilege of the elite, yet by the middle of the nineteenth century one out of every eight families employed at least one domestic laborer. In urban areas this percentage was even higher, with one out of every four families employing female servants.[3] The rapid change in the availability of domestic labor was a result of the mass tide of foreign immigration into urban areas in the nineteenth century. The arrival of men and women, desperate for jobs and isolated from the traditional

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[1] Six Hundred Dollars a Year: A Wife's Effort at Low Living Under High Prices (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1867), 6.

[2] Daniel E. Sutherland, Americans and Their Servants: Domestic Service in the United States from 1800 to 1920 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 45.

[3] Ibid., 46.

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business networks, provided a pool of cheap domestic labor.

Without the occurrence of this cheap labor pool, the middle-class standard of domesticity could not have been achieved. The demanding nature of household work, which required real physical labor, and the dominant cultural ideal of the woman as a nurturing mother made impossible demands on middle-class women. The pressure of the ideal was so great that one woman was able to write that

> Domestic life, in some of its various phases, makes up life's sum, to the great mass of our sex. To fail of love, honor, peace and happiness, in her domestic relationships, is with most women to make a failure of life. [4]

Or, as another female writer complained,

> Desire as we may that all houses should be perfectly kept, disapprove as we do, under the present order of things, of any neglect or carelessness there, yet is it not enough for one woman to take care of her babies properly, without taking care of a house in addition?[5]

Both of these quotes reveal the ambivalence on part of middle-class women to the popular domestic ideal. Hiring a servant to complete the more demanding tasks provided the middle-class wife with more freedom to fulfill her role as caretaker and made the domestic ideal more

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[4] Melva, Home Whispers to Husbands and Wives (New York: American Female Guardian Society, 1859), 157.

[5] Harriet Prescott Spofford, The Servant Girl Question, (1881: reprint, New York; Arno Press, 1972), 130.

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possible. However, the presence of hired domestics created other problems, especially the question of where the female servant was positioned within middle-class domestic ideology.

One way to resolve the contradictions female domestic labor posed for domestic ideology was simply to ignore them. Architecture was used to physically separate and isolate the hired servants from the family. Servants were given a segregated living spaces located near or above the kitchen or in the attic. Harriet Prescott Spofford gave a dramatic description of the sleeping quarters of most servants:

> We have known it to be placed in a little black hole off the kitchen area, where, till she had gotten used to it, the occupant could lie and quake with fear, knowing all the family to be at least two flights of stairs away; but oftenest it is a garret at the top of the house, uncarpeted, half-furnished, any bed, and bedclothes; nothing wholesome or happy in it; nothing calculated to make a girl feel she has a retreat and a spot where she can...make a little home for herself.[6]

Two things are emphasized in this paragraph: the physical <u>and</u> the emotional distance of the servants from their employers. As well, the de-personalization of the furnishings and the lack of individuation implied in the passage, so important in the master bedroom, made it impossible for the space to be a "little home."

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[6] Ibid., 39.

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In fact, servant rooms were easily identified by the drastic difference in the price and quality of the objects. Adrian Forty in Objects of Desire: Design and Society from Wedgwood to IBM saw this overt plainness of furniture as an essential step in differentiating servant spaces.

> ...complicated architectural solutions to the problem of the relationship between master and servant were available only to the wealthy. A more economical and, in many ways, more incisive method of indicating to servants the inferiority of their status was through the development of plain and humble design for the beds they slept in, the chairs they sat upon, and the plates they ate off...[7]

An example of the enforced plainness of servant furnishings was the servant's bed advertised in the Coogan Brother's catalogue of 1876. The style of the bed was the cheapest form of cottage style available at an average of $2.50 per bedstead. These bedsteads were usually made from ash, maple, birch or chestnut and were never advertised as part of a suite. The only ornamentation on these types of bedsteads consisted of a low, spindle (turned) headboard. Other bedsteads with no molding or appplied decoration sold for as little as $1.50.[8]

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[7] Forty, 83.

[8] The conclusions are based on the sample of trade catalogues.

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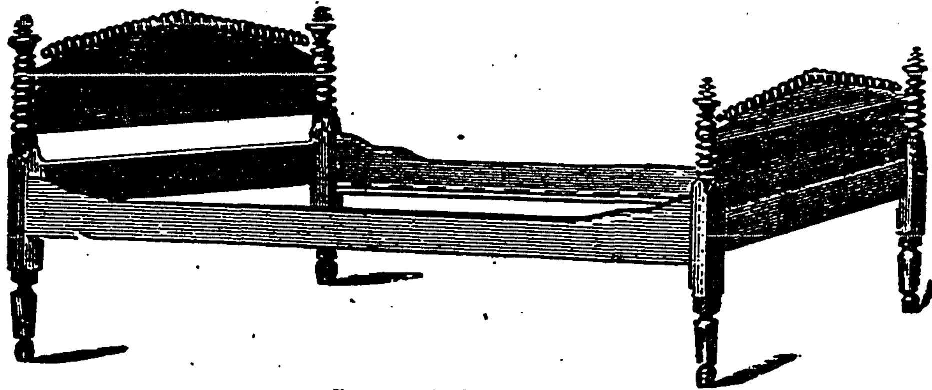


**Figure 4.1** Servant's bed, advertised by Coogan Brothers. (new York 1876?) Courtesy, the Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection.

The absence of ornament is important as spindle bedsteads were popular servant furniture at a time when the high, elaborate headboards of the Renaissance style dominated middle-class bedrooms. The fact that revival styles were considered inappropriate for servant use reflects class assumptions about style. A less charitable writer viewed plain furniture for servants as a practical need, writing "if they had curtains, [they] might very probably set them on fire with their candles." [9] Whatever the rationale, the impact of the visual difference would have been unescapable.

[9] Leslie, 326.

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Iron bedsteads were also commonly promoted for use in servant rooms. Downing mentioned iron bedsteads in The Architecture of Country Houses as an inexpensive and clean option for furnishing servant rooms.[10] These bedsteads were strictly functional unlike the expensive, ornamental iron bedsteads that became popular in the 1870's.

Of the inventories in my sample, three specifically listed rooms for domestics. The 1861 probate estate of Samuel Ver Planck did not give a listing of individual furniture within the servants room, but it did provide a sum total of $5.00 for the value of the furniture.[11] A staggering difference in sleeping environments is revealed when compared to the Ver Planck master bedroom which was valued at $155.50.

The Thomas & Son catalogue of 1866 listed a "back attic" which from the contents can be labeled as a servant's room.[12] The items cataloged for the space included a low-post bedstead with a feather bed and two feather pillows, painted bureau, mahogany case drawers with toilet glass, two arm chairs, a looking glass, towel

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[10] Downing, 418.

[11] Estate Inventory of Samuel Ver Planck, 1861 Joseph Downs Manuscript Collection, the Winterthur Library.

[12] Thomas & Sons, auctioneers, Catalogue of Elegant Furniture (Philadelphia, 1866), the Winterthur Library.

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rack and toilet ware, and 25 yards of carpet. By itself, this list of contents tells little, but when compared with the best bedroom significant differences are revealed. The best bedroom contained a carved, French walnut bedstead, 54 yards velvet carpet, hair mattress, enclosed washstand, carved walnut wardrobe, walnut double dressing bureau, sofa, sofa tables and matching chairs. The master bedroom was furnished in high, middle-class style. Wardrobes were used instead of the old-fashioned case piece. Feather beds by this period were considered unhealthy, yet they were still in use in the servant's room. Servant furniture was painted instead of carved, and the master bedroom listed numerous decorative ornaments which were missing in the attic room.

The probate inventory of Daniel Webster was the third inventory to provide detailed information concerning servants' rooms.[13] The Webster household was not middle-class; it was a wealthy family with numerous servants. Most middle-class families could only afford to pay and board one servant. However, the Webster inventory is useful for visualizing servants quarters, and it exposes some very clear differences between standards for the two different living situations.

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[13] Appraisal of the Estate of Daniel Webster (Massachusetts, 1852) Joseph Downs Manuscript collection, the Winterthur Library.

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The Webster household inventory listed a back wing for the servants. The inventory recorded the following articles: five bedsteads, bedding, seven chairs, two washstands, two looking glasses, two bureaus, a table, and five books. The total was $61.00, and the wing was capable of housing at least five persons. In addition, there were also attic rooms containing servant quarters. The South Western attic possessed a bedstead and bedding, carpet, three chairs, one table, and a washstand at a total of $36.00.

In contrast, the master bedroom was a suite of rooms, including a dressing room and bedroom. The bedroom had a bedstead and bedding, wardrobe, Psyche glass, washstand and toilet set, armchair, rocking chair, six cane bottom chairs, three ottomans, two small stands, mantel ornaments, portraits and engravings, and thirty-nine books. The adjoining dressing room also included a bedstead and bedding, washstand, wardrobe, bureau, table and dressing glass, five chairs, engravings, looking glass, two cabinets, and seventy-three books. The total value of the two rooms was $238.50. Again the difference in value between the master room and servant's room was astonishing. Although one expects a large difference in value between the two spaces, the inventories show more than a tripled difference in value. The gap was even

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wider when one realizes the servants rooms housed a greater percentage of occupants but contained fewer objects.

What was surprising about the inventories was that the type of objects listed did not vary as much as expected. Although the servant rooms were not furnished with suites, the same standardization of objects present in the main bedroom was extended to their rooms. The standard bedroom suite of bedstead, washstand, bureau, chair, and looking glass are present in almost all inventories and accounts of servants' rooms. This uniformity suggests an attempt to extend a middle-class concept of appropriateness to domestics space.

The reform potential inherent in furnishing the servant rooms according to middle-class standards was described in Hints on Home and Home Furnishings, a English domestic economy manual also published in America.

> ...with regard to the servants' bedrooms generally, they ought, although the articles may be common, to have the same conveniences as used in other chambers of the house. With a small chest of drawers to serve as a dressing table, and a washstand in her chamber, many a servant would be clean and tidy in her person and habits who otherwise would be careless of dirt and a sloven.[14]

[14] Hints on Home and Home Furnishings (London, 1861), 117.

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The effort to standardize servant rooms along middle-class principles was an attempt to enforce a domestic ideology based on cleanliness, privacy, and individualism that were present in the middle-class home. However, this ideology could be enforced in rhetoric for if the servants were accorded the same rights of privacy and individuation the distinction between the two classes would be lost.

Thus, one notable distinction between the rooms of servant and master was the absence of leisure or luxury goods in servant rooms. Engravings, wardrobes, lounges, etc. were foreign to these spaces. Writers such as Ella Rodman Church who supported the right of every servant to a clean and soft bed were also was quick to assure their readers that "it is not necessary to furnish the servants quarters with hair mattresses and a piano."[15] Some servants were probably lucky to receive the clean bed. As one serving woman described her experience on seeing her lodgings for the first time,

> My heart sunk then, for I'd always had a place that was comfortable all my life, but it sunk deeper when I went up there. A hall bedroom, with a single bed an' a small table, with a washbowl an' small pitcher, one chair an' some nails in the door for hanging things; that was all except a torn shade at the window. I looked at the bed. The two ragged comfortables were foul with long use. I thought of my nice bed

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[15] Church, 96-97.

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> down at Spring Street, my own good sheets an' blankets an' all, an' I began to cry.[16]

The loss of basic material comforts was the cause given by the young woman for quitting her position.

The distinction between master and servant rooms was also enforced in the private appearance of the rooms. Servants had little opportunity to personalize their rooms. They did not have the leisure to do fancy work to individualize their room or the extra cash to buy ornaments or bric-a-brac to decorate it.[17] The style, quality, and quantity of the objects were determined by the mistress with little concern for the individual taste of the occupant.

The major difference between the master and domestic spaces was the lack of privacy available to the domestic. A servant lived in a private room only if she was the sole servant hired by the family. If there were more than one servant (for instance a cook or nursery maid in addition to a maid), they were usually housed together. For

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[16] Helen Campbell, Prisoners of Poverty; Women Wage-Workers, Their Trades and Their Lives (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1887), 146.

[17] In 1869 the average monthly wage with board for female servants in the New England states was $11.28. United States Bureau of Statistics, The Cost of Labor and Subsistence in the United States for the Year 1869 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1870), 55. This was a high point in wages. Earlier in 1860, a domestic worker could expect to earn $6.81 a week.

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example, the servant wing of the Webster estate contained five bedsteads but only two washstands and bureaus. The significance is that the furniture was shared by the domestics. Both space and privacy were thus limited in servant rooms. As well, servant quarters were often intermingled with storage and supply areas. This placed the servants' quarters in the midst of public work areas. Although it was a major offence to enter a middle-class bedroom unannounced, the requirements of the household made regular traffic into the servant quarters for supplies unavoidable.

The nature of domestic work itself made privacy almost impossible for female servants. Servants who lodged in the home were always available for the demands of their employers. As the Beecher sisters wrote in their compilation,

> do not people feel at liberty to question servants about their private affairs, to comment on their dress and appearance, in a manner which they would feel to be an impertinence, if reciprocated?[18]

This loss of privacy was the most frequently cited reasons for leaving domestic service. As one ex-servant explained:

> I had a good room and everything nice, and she gave me a great many things, but I'd have spared them all if only I could have a little time to

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[18] C.E. Beecher and H.B. Stowe, 315,

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> myself. I was all worn out, and at last I had to go.[19]

This quote is important for it shows the female servants within the middle-class household in part shared the middle-class domestic ideology of privacy. Conflict arose when servants' expectations were denied. However, the denial of the servant's right of privacy was necessary to maintain a separate, superior identity for the middle-class. The contradictions within the ideology had to be resolved, at least for the middle-class housewife, since it occurred within the very space of the home. The conflict itself revealed the difficulty in accommodating a doctrine of an upwardly mobile, egalitarian society with the demand for servant labor that made this way of life possible.

One way the housewife was able to distance herself from these contradictions was by perceiving the servant as outside the codes of genteel society. This was not too difficult as most servants were Irish and foreign both culturally and nationally to the majority of the middle-class. This difference made the claims of incompetence seem more reasonable. Domestic literature was filled of "Bridgets," straight from peasant huts, who had to be taught even the rudimentary practices of running a

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[19] Campbell, 229.

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civilized household. The authoritative Dr. Cahill supported middle-class women's notions of their servants, writing:

> Being the daughters of laborers, or needy tradesman, or persecuted, rack rented cotters, they are ignorant of the common duties of servants in respectable positions. They can neither wash nor iron clothes. They don't understand the cleaning of glass or silverplate. They cannot make fires expeditiously, or dust carpets, or polish the furniture.[20]

By taking this view, the housewife was able to place herself in the role of a tolerant tutor and important socializing influence. This created such a gulf between the mistress and maid that the housewife could be praised for teaching middle-class values without expecting the servant to be able to practice them.

As well, by placing servant labor outside of civilization, some of the contradictions their presence might have otherwise posed were resolved. However, servants presented a further problem to the Victorian concept of domesticity as the hiring and regulating of servant labor required the wife to step outside of the passive, nurturing role expected of her. This problem was clearly perceived by the female domestic writers of the

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[20] Dr. Cahill, Metropolitan Record, 1860. Quoted in Faye Dudden, Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth Century America (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1983.), 66.

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time. Harriet Spofford identified the problem as a specific challenge to the husband's authority.

> In the first place, command being something instinctive and of long habit in the masculine nature, we have imagined that it was rather irksome to our male critics to see their wives exercising it...you will see that half his criticism is of his wife's manner in directing her servant, and is demonstrative of the way in which that direction nettles him. [21]

Spofford's statement may be an extreme example, but it does expose the problem the presence of servants created within the hierarchy of the home. Here, again, the conflict was resolved by the maternal role adapted by the housewife towards her servants. The respect and status given women as mothers afforded them a degree of legitimation in exercising authority. By defining her task as controlling cross or wayward children, the housewife remained within acceptable boundaries of the domestic principle.

In real life however, the servant was not in the position of a privileged child. Both architecture and objects were used to forcefully to establish the servant as outside of the middle-class home. Rooms placed remotely from the family's activities and furnished in stark contrast to their own created an overt and inflexible hierarchial arrangement. Although housewives

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[21] Spofford, The Servant Girl Question, 100.

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complained of the transience of their servant (often replacing them every few months), the constant replacement of new servants re-enforced the position that servants were not part of the household.

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## CONCLUSION

The domestic ideology of privatization suffused all levels of the home from private bedrooms to the parlor, reaching down to the servants' quarters where the tensions between class and domestic ideology were most evident. The power that this domestic ideology held for the middle-class can be understood only within the context of Victorian attitudes towards objects. Domestic writers consistently stressed the importance of objects in creating and determining the moral environment of the home. As Timothy Shay Arthur wrote,

> As our homes are, so will we in great measure be, for every day their impress is on us - every day we feel their beauty, or are marred by their disorder and deformity - every day we give out salutary or perverting influences, as well as receive them.[1]

The belief that the environment of the home had a moral influence on individuals represented a form of domestic environmentalism. Domestic household books which offered

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[1] Arthur, Our Homes: Their Cares and Duties, Joys and Sorrows, iv.



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an easy formula for moral success must have been popular to a middle-class audience.

Within this context, then, the style and ornament of furnishings, in addition to the types of objects chosen to surround the individual, were understood to reflect the moral character of the home and thus the individual. Individual taste was likewise tied to a belief that the environment shaped the individual, but, more importantly, that the individual could also shape the environment. Thus a reciprocal relationship between the individual and the environment was established. Furnishing the home, through the act of consumption, provided the opportunity for the individual to create both a private and public identity for him or herself.

It was an ideology of privatization which underscored the importance of individual self-cultivation that allowed the individual to navigate between these public and private identities. The bedroom provided a space for the cultivation of a middle-class subjectivity and through the study of the bedroom, an understanding of how this subjectivity was expressed can be reached. The individualization of the middle-class bedroom, the importance of style for expressing a social identity, and the use of furnishings to establish class boundaries all reflected a conscious shaping of the environment.

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By combining the concept of individual cultivation with domestic environmentalism which legitimized the consumption of certain goods by justifying their moral potential, privacy and consumption became interchangeable. If privacy was the cultivation of the self and consumption the expression of the self, then privacy and consumption became linked in a chain whereby identity was formed through objects. Although bedrooms were conceived as private spaces, they were directed to a public audience. The fact that so much was published on the furnishing and decorating of the bedroom reveals the existence of a public debate over this private realm. Knowledge of how privacy, and the private bedroom, were part of a larger context of the creation of a middle-class identity emphasizes the need to understand the Victorian home as a complex network of relationships in which the bedroom was intimately connected to this formation of a Victorian ideology.

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