BEAUTY AND FRAILTY

In the Victorian period, a time of increasing industrialization and urbanization, roles of all members of society were changing rapidly. Many men began to leave the house to work and more children were in school due to compulsory education laws. Contrary to many people’s beliefs, women did work at this time. In fact, the working-class population of women was large and diverse:

The precise size of the female working population is impossible to know since the Census returns almost certainly underestimated it; the numbers of women factory workers may well have been more or less accurate, domestic servants probably rather less so, but thousands of milliners and seamstresses, washerwomen, framework knitters, nailers, straw-plaiters and women workers in the score or more of “sweated” trades where they worked in their own homes, sometimes whole-time, sometimes part-time, must have escaped the Census investigators, especially when it was feared that penalties might follow from a full declaration of income. (Burnett, 1974, p. 17)

While working-class women worked outside the home and rural women still had farm work, middle- and upper-class women found themselves at home with little to contribute to the family’s income. Thus, roles changed as women were expected to become “the primary emotional and physical caretakers of their families” (Stacy, 2002, p.25). Even as much as women were supposed to find this new role wholly fulfilling, not all did. Some women did begin to work outside the home for political causes such as promoting women’s suffrage or ending child labor.