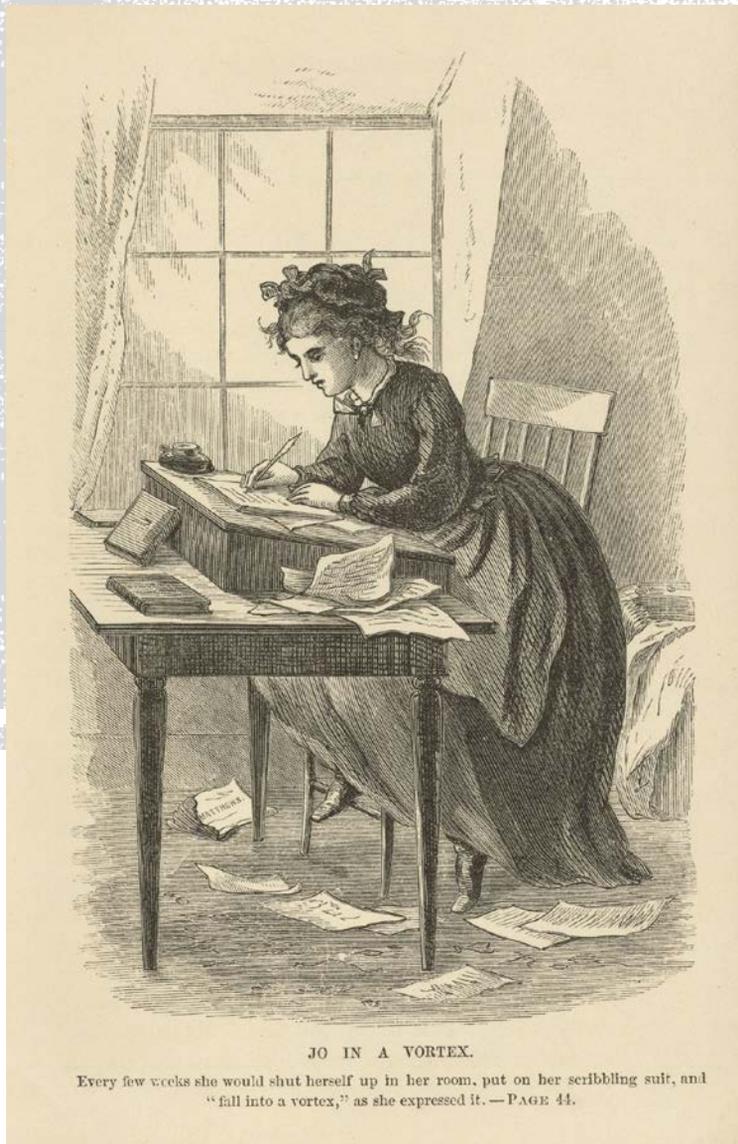


Not Your Average Josephine

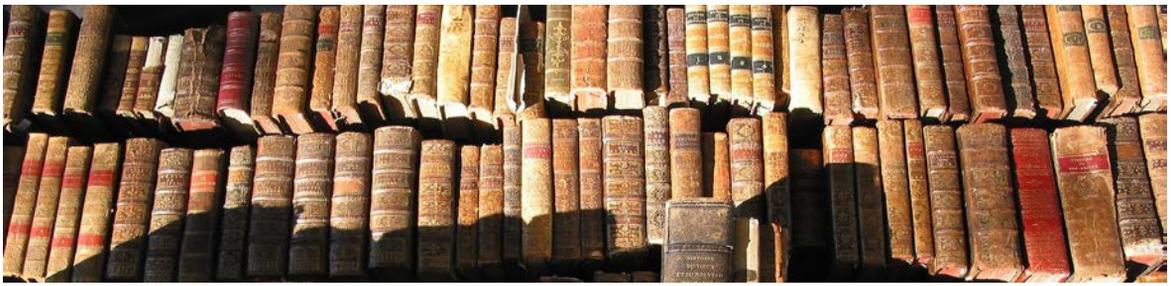


A project which explores preconceptions behind notions of
the Victorian woman writer



Over the past five years the ICVWW has traced and reassessed, decade by decade, how women's writing developed across the cultural context of the 1840s to the 1930s in the pioneering project *From Brontë to Bloomsbury: Realism, Sensation and the New in Women's Writing from the 1840s to the 1930s.*

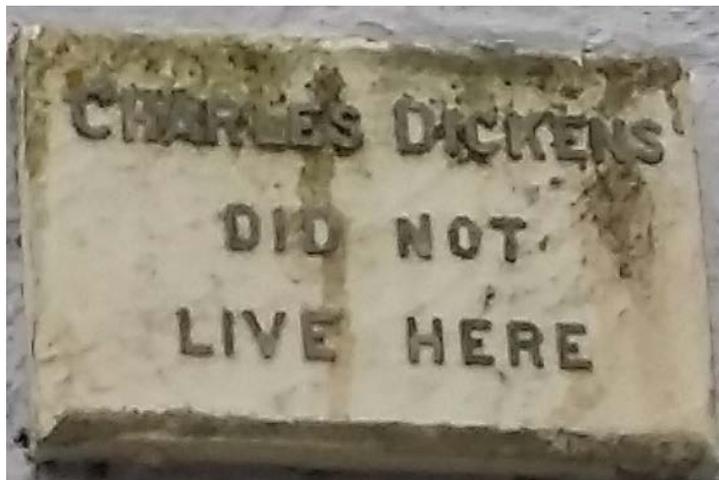




But what have we learned about the women themselves? What did they have in common and what differences did they have?

What did it really mean to be a professional writer and a woman in the Victorian period?

What image comes to mind when we think of Victorian women writers?



Most people have a certain image in mind when thinking about Victorian writers more generally.....

If there was an average Victorian woman writer, what would she be like?

We asked 100 people, with no knowledge of Victorian women writers, seven very simple questions, designed to see how they imagined female writers from the period to be.



The first question looks broadly at perceptions of the subject.

Q1. What's the first thing you think of when we say 'Victorian women writers'?



The word cloud shows answers by frequency. Clearly some writers are more well-known than others, with the Brontë sisters and George Eliot the most popular answers.

Jane Austen and Mary Shelley are also popular writers in our survey but actually wrote and published wholly or predominantly outside the Victorian period. Dickens also puts in an appearance!

In more detail:

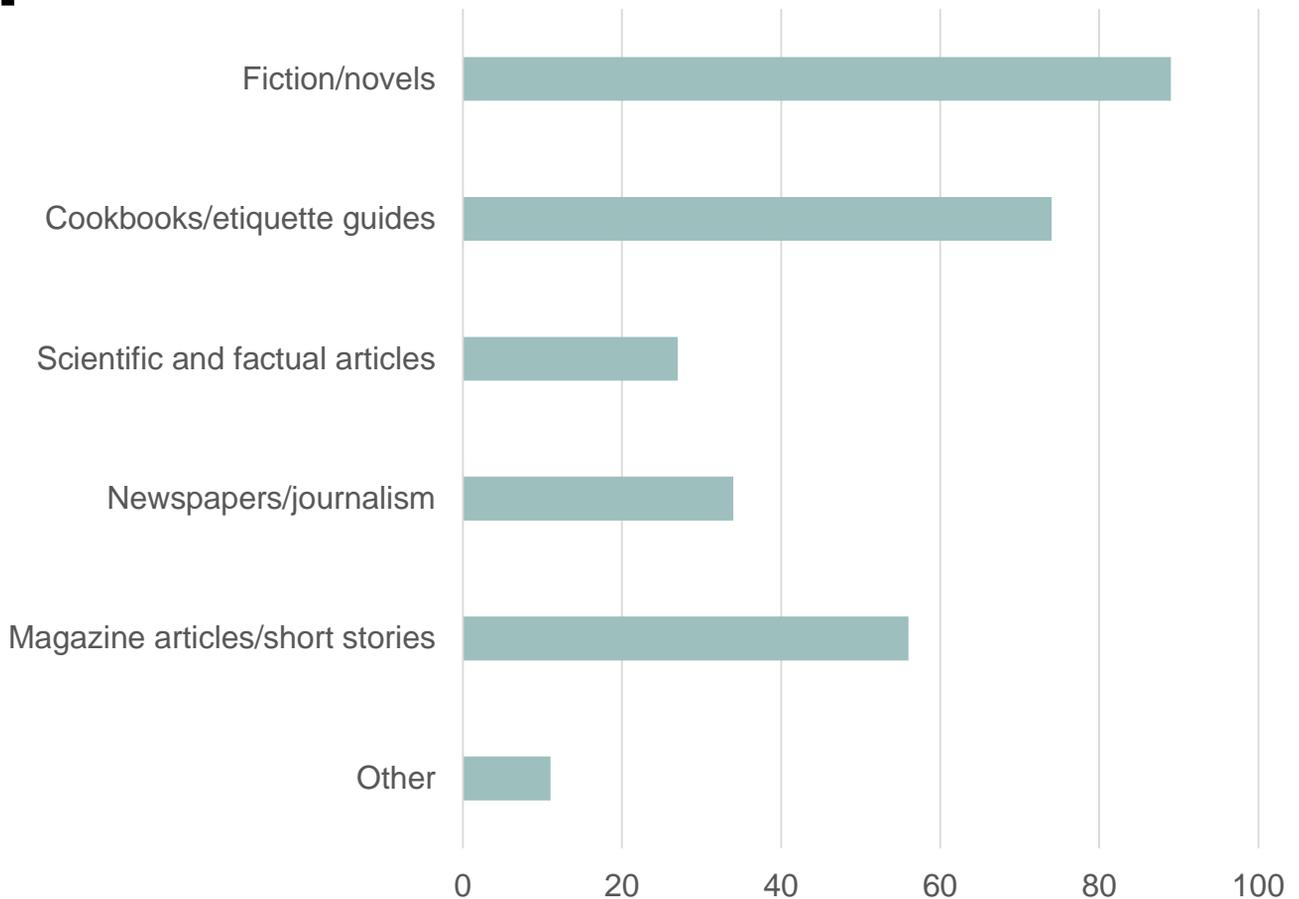
Melodrama
Middle-class women Big dresses
Not my kind of book Beatrice Webb
Dickens Sashes and meat pies Using male aliases
Jane Eyre I'm not sure I know any Pretended to be men
Equality Dark houses on windy moors Christina Rossetti
Brave ladies Frankenstein & Mary Shelley Charlotte Brontë
Undervalued Men telling women what to write Horrible Histories
Suffragettes Excitement, amazement, brilliance Writing aliases
My best friend Black and white posed photos of them Corsets
Romantic Ladies dressed in long black dresses The Brontë sisters
Mrs. Gaskell Corsets and long dresses, plus a small parasol Brontë
Erm Elizabeth Barrett Browning and very held-back writing
Ladies in beautiful dresses living in the country with a pencil and note book in their hands
I don't know any. I've got an English degree and I'm a feminist. Fuck
Romance That they didn't have "A Room of One's Own" Novels
George Eliot Elizabeth Gaskell Probably had to use a male pseudonym Jane Austen
Rare
Old-fashioned Maybe Queen Victoria wrote a book Ann Radcliffe
Victorian women who wrote novels. Dust
Tea-cosy hair That I know nothing about them Virginia Woolf
Brontë sisters Classic books, well written Queen Victoria
Tricky question Elizabeth Barrett Browning Firebrands
Drawing rooms Big skirt, boring hair Mary Shelley
Mrs Beeton Corsets and parasols Quill pens
Rebels First-wave feminism Gothic
Lush Emily Brontë

The results show a wonderful range of responses. The influence of television period dramas can be seen in references to dress/appearance. The impact of the curriculum is evidenced by the presence of better-known writers that many individuals may have studied at school.

But we also see very personal responses, respondents who judged their own knowledge, respondents who engaged with particular aspects of Victorian women's writing or who felt that these writers were brave on the one hand and boring on the other!

This question looks at perceptions of gender and genre.

Q2. What sort of writing do you think women did in the Victorian period?



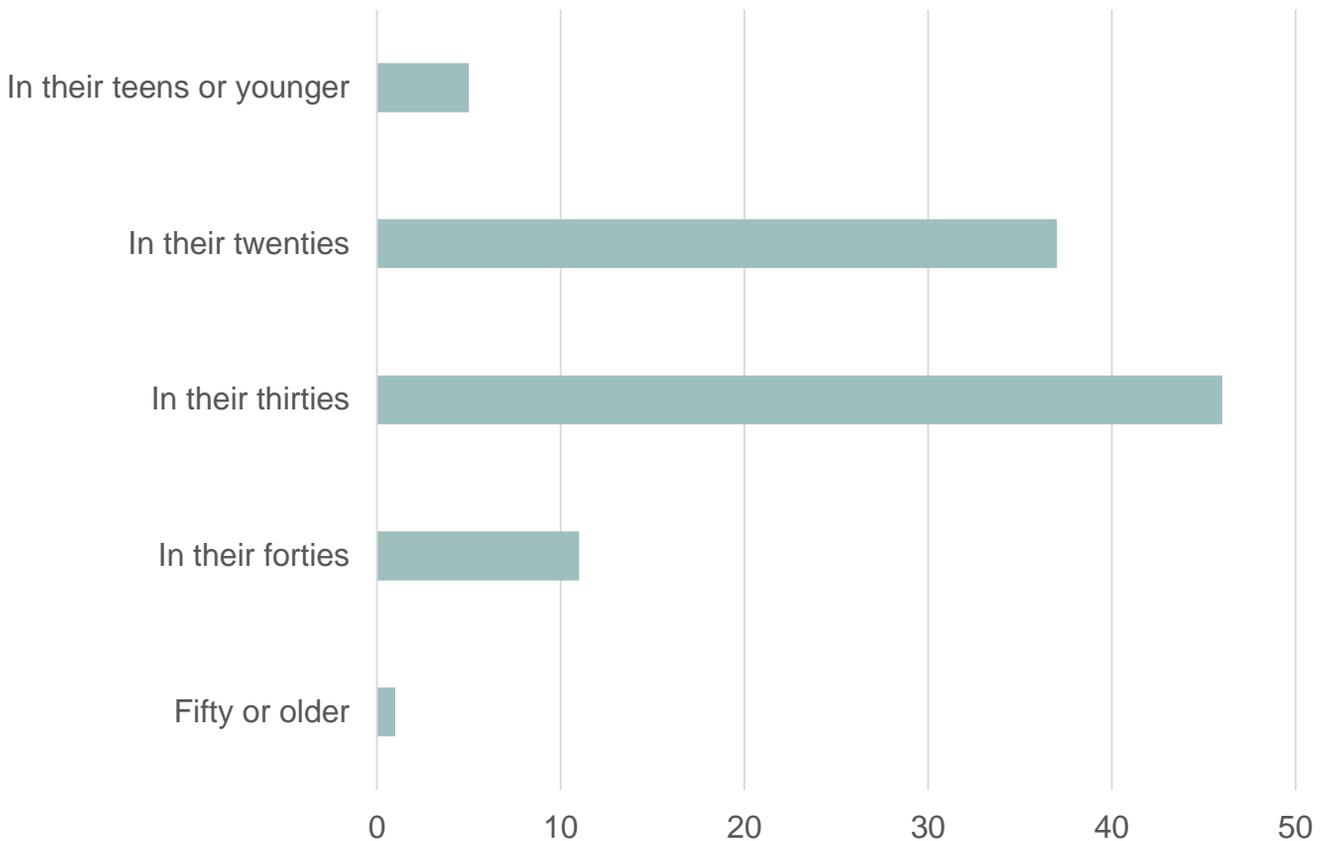
Fiction – novels and cookbooks/etiquette guides are the most popular choices here.

Responses to the 'other' category include:

- Poetry
- Letters
- Probably all of the categories given
- Polemic economic works and critical ethnographies
- Translations
- Anything and everything
- Probably everything, just like now
- Essays, treatises
- Naughty ones, Victorians were a bit saucy weren't they?

This question looks at perceptions of age and professionalism, plus assumptions about the wider Victorian era.

Q3. How old do you think most Victorian women writers were when they first published their most successful works?

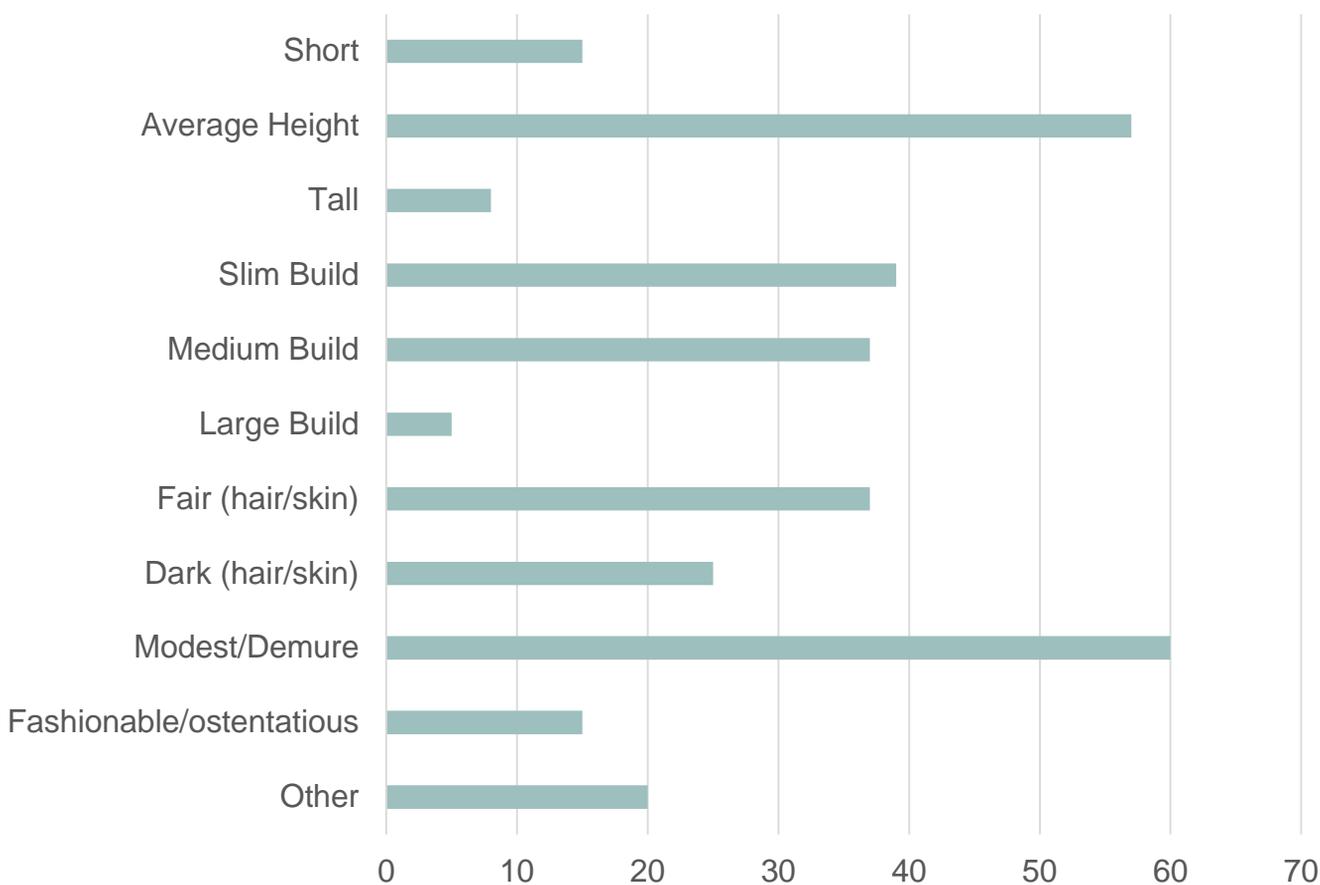


What factors may have influenced our respondents? Life expectancy was known to be shorter in the nineteenth-century but does this have an affect on the average age of women writers? Did women typically pursue writing as a career from childhood or was this a 'fallback' employment for financial gain only and therefore later in their lives?

The consensus indicates our respondents mostly thought that writers were in their thirties but quite a few opting for the twenties too. Life clearly didn't begin at 50 for women writers....

This question looks at expectations of gender and possible aesthetic stereotypes.

Q4. If you had to describe the typical physical appearance of a Victorian female writer, how would you describe her?

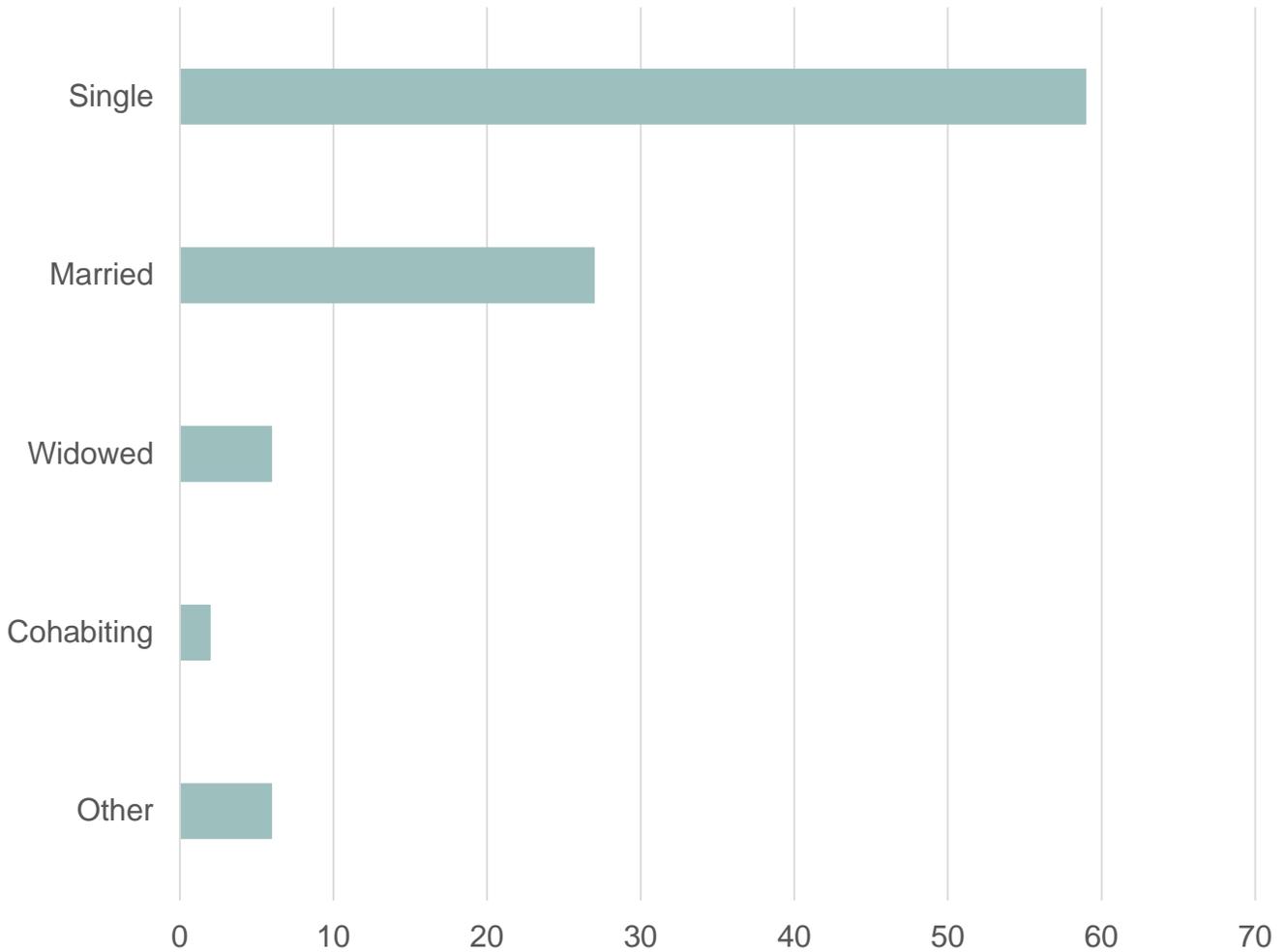


Responses to 'other' category include:

- Determined and strong
- Varied, like all writers
- Wearing a large hat!
- White middle class
- All/any of the above
- Not poor
- Dependent on type of writing
- Petite
- White
- Various but all white
- Corset and bum pads
- Voluptuous
- Bit careless about dressing
- Respectable, high collars, long hair
- Do not feel there is a 'typical' physical appearance but generally were educated and adhered to the social conventions of the time or tried to push the boundaries

This question looks at perceptions of social and familial expectations and how these might have affected the professional woman.

Q5. Marital status. At the time of the publication of their most successful work(s) do you think most women writers were:



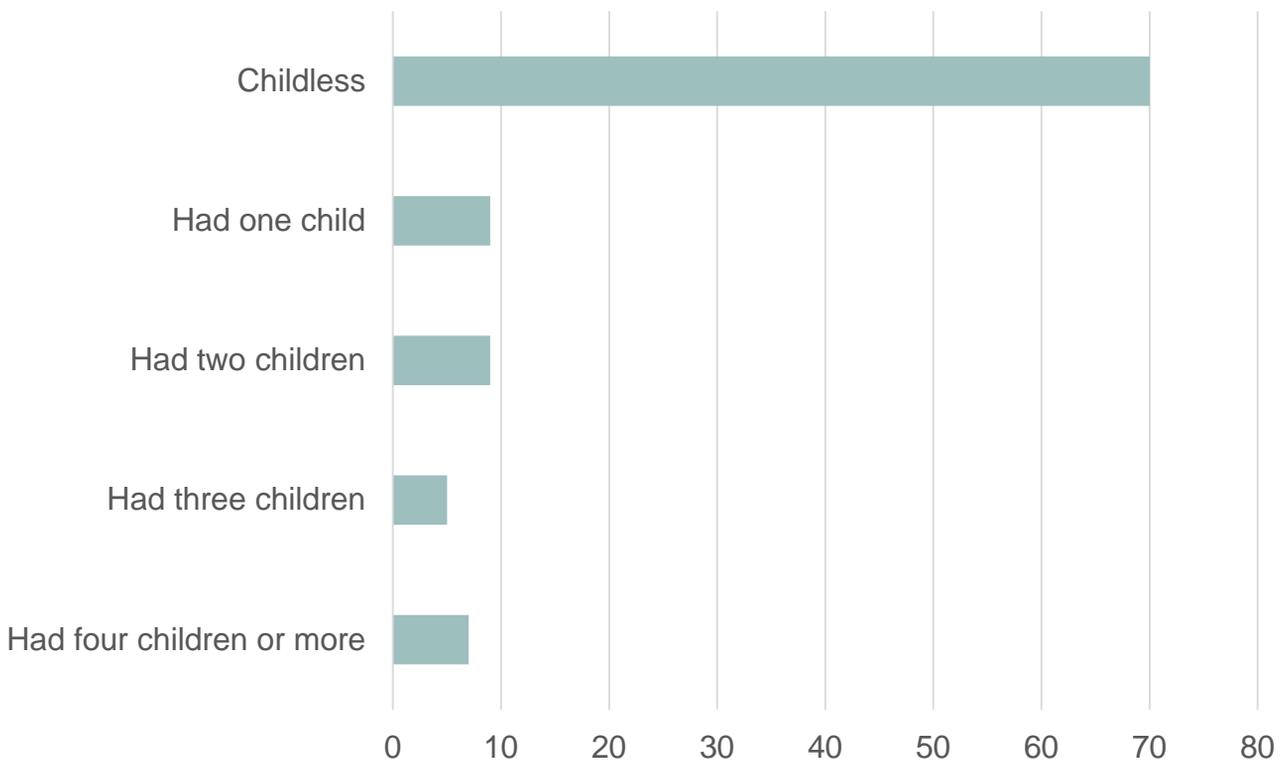
Responses to 'other' category include:

- Varied
- No general difference
- Diverse
- All the above
- A mix, like now
- Any of the above

None of our respondents suggested additional categories.

Again, this question looks at perceptions of social and familial expectations and how these may affect the professional woman. It also brings into focus possible motivations for writing and their other responsibilities.

Q6. Dependants. At the time of the publication of their most successful work(s) do you think most women writers were:

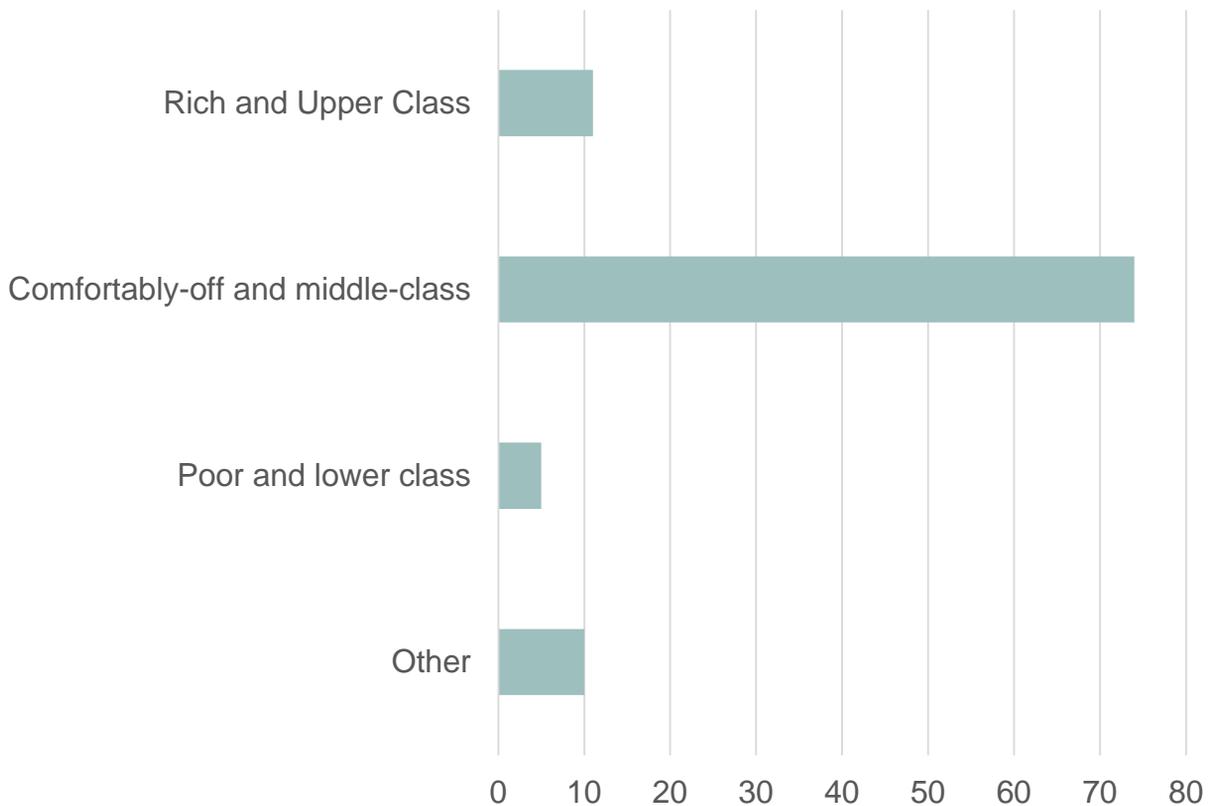


This question refers to living children only, not births. This question encourages respondents to think about the motivations behind women's writing and other responsibilities which may have taken up their time.

Interestingly, most of our respondents thought that women writers were childless. This is perhaps based on the respondents' knowledge of the Brontës, who emerged earlier in the survey as the most well-known female writers. Perhaps this is merely a reflection of the demands placed upon a professional woman in the period.

This question looks at motivations for writing and the correlation between the profession and social class.

Q7. Money and class. At the time of the publication of their most successful work(s) do you think most women writers were:



Responses to 'other' category include:

- Upper-middle class but needed funds
- Middle class but not comfortably off (x4)
- All of the above again!
- Varying depending on style of writing
- Either poor/lower class or comfortable well off/middle class
- Rich and upper class or comfortably off middle class (both)
- Mixture

Based on what our 100 respondents said, the average Victorian woman writer would have been:

Aged in their thirties

Of average height, slim build, fair hair/skin and modestly dressed

Unmarried

Childless

Comfortably-off and middle-class

And wrote mostly fiction novels and cookbooks or etiquette guides



But how does this compare with real Victorian women writers?

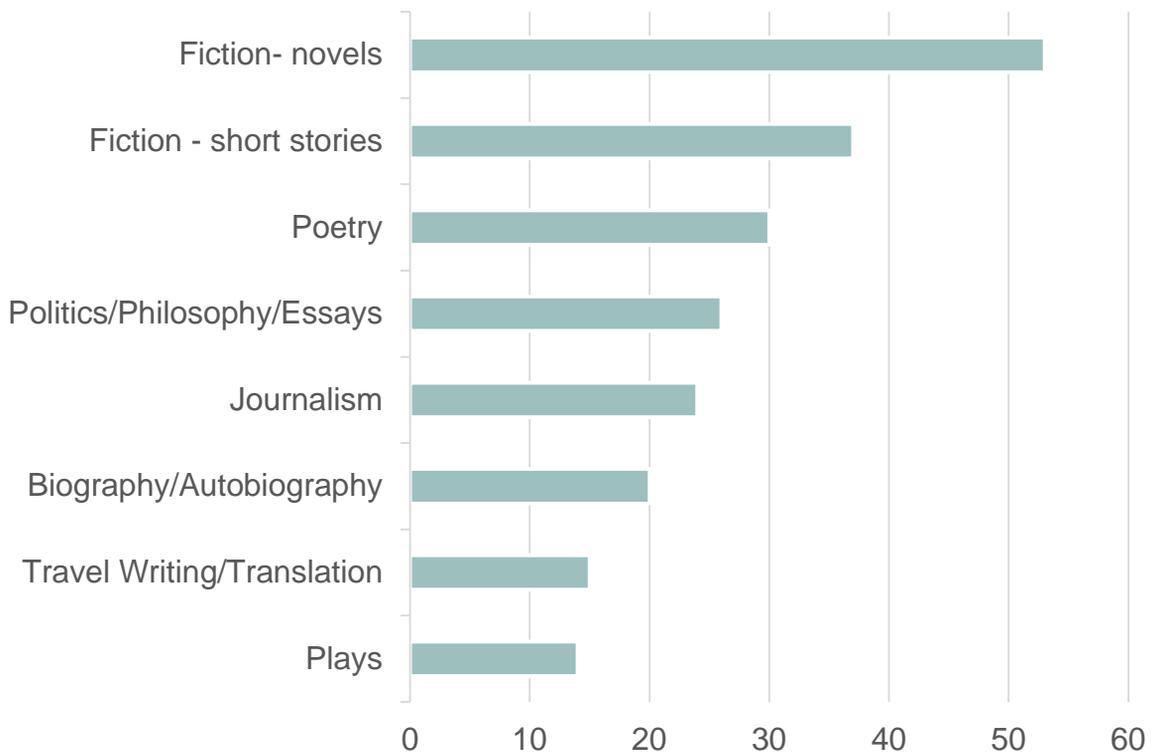


We compiled a database of women writers who have featured in papers given in the first four ICVWW conferences (covering women's writing from 1840-1919) to find out!

Charlotte Perkins Gilman
Elizabeth Barrett Browning Elizabeth Banks
George Eliot Rhoda Broughton Felicia Hemans
Ella D'Arcy Geraldine Jewsbury Anne Brontë
Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna
Jessie Fothergill Adelaide Procter Dinah Craik
Charlotte Brontë Harriet Martineau Mary Cholmondeley
Mary Coleridge Mary Linskill Ada Nield Chew
Edith Simcox Alice Meynell Ellen Wood Mary Eliza Haweis
Margaret Harkness Catherine Louisa Pirkis Mona Caird
Eliza Cook Margaret Oliphant Charlotte Yonge
Olive Schreiner Constance Naden Virginia Woolf
George Sand Caroline Norton Anna Sewell Violet Fane
Sarah Grand Vernon Lee Edith Nesbit Mary Augusta Ward
Augusta Webster Emma Orczy Charlotte Riddell
Marie Corelli Frances Power Cobbe George Egerton
Caroline Clive Mina Loy LT Meade Sarah Stickney Ellis
Ouida Amy Levy Mathilde Blind
Christina Rossetti Eliza Lynn Linton
Josephine Butler Florence Marryat Emily Brontë
Catherine Crowe Bessie Rayner Parkes Elizabeth Gaskell
Catherine Gore Harriet Beecher Stowe Emily Dickinson
Ella Hepworth Dixon
Anna Katharine Green Isabella Beeton
Amelia Edwards Mary Elizabeth Braddon

Genre

To enable the search function to be efficient on a database of Victorian women writers, genre categories had to be defined down to a short list of broad categories.



These categories are, of course, subjective and incorporate many other sub-genres such as crime fiction, household manuals, supernatural stories etc. From the initial genres given on the survey to the general public, cookbooks/etiquette guides did not feature sufficiently frequently to justify an independent search term and hence categories here are slightly different.

Data was collected for 69 authors. Each author was matched with all applicable categories – the results are shown above. Fiction – novels comes top of the analysis, with 24% of the genre total, followed by short stories (17%) and poetry (14%).

Age

From the women featured in our database, the average age at the publication of their best-known work is.....

37 years old!



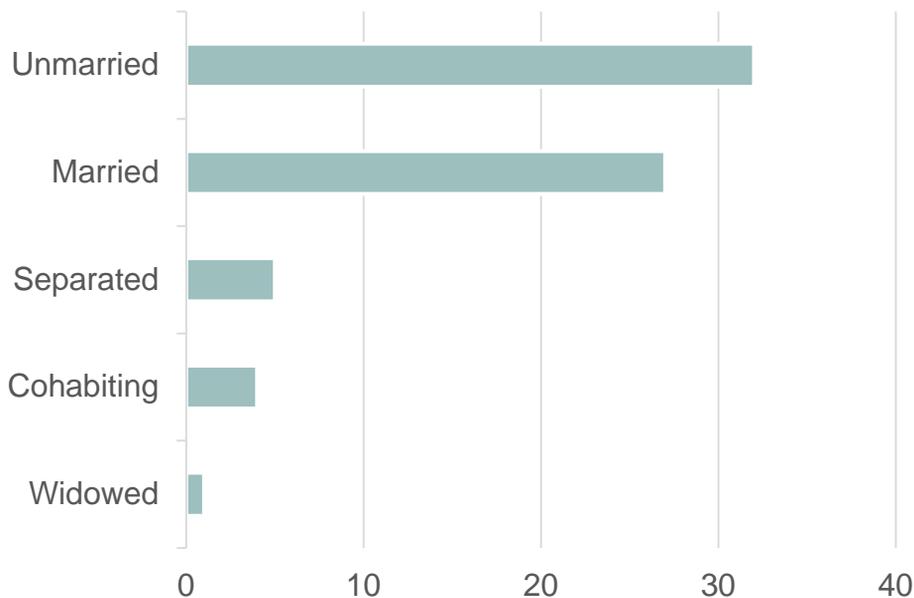
Mary Augusta Ward and Elizabeth Banks are the only two of our featured writers to have published their best-known works at 37 years old precisely.

To calculate the average age of the writers at the publication of their best known work, their birth dates were first ascertained. Best known works were adjudged by those still in print or most continuously in print, those coming top in internet searches and those stated as best known in ODNB or Wikipedia entries. Birth dates were then subtracted from publication dates. This is accurate to years, not months and in the case of serialisation assumes date of first publication of the first part.

Marital Status

From the women featured in our database, the average marital status at the publication of their best-known work is.....

Unmarried



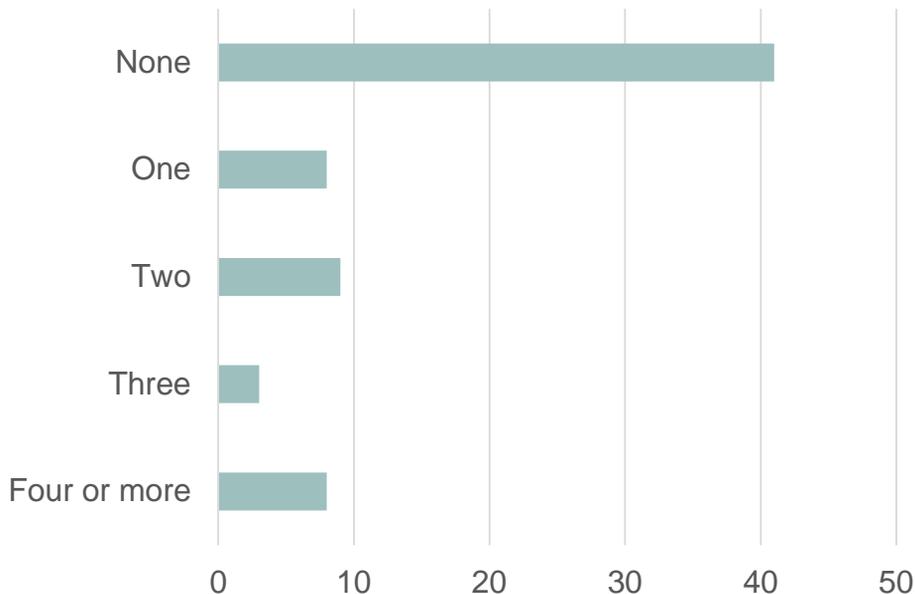
'Unmarried' refers to women who have never been married, as opposed to the more modern term 'single' which may include women previously married but now divorced or separated. Though women could not be legally separated in the period, several women considered themselves to be separated from their husbands or were legally separated in other countries

Cohabiting is more difficult to ascertain and may not necessarily have implied a social or sexual status. However, as in the case of Mary Braddon, who cohabited with John Maxwell (he was married to a wife detained in an asylum from whom he could not divorce), the choice to live together was an intentional status, though they claimed to be married.

Dependants

From the women featured in our database, the average number of living children at the publication of their best-known work is.....

None



59% of our featured writers were childless at the time that their best-known works were published.

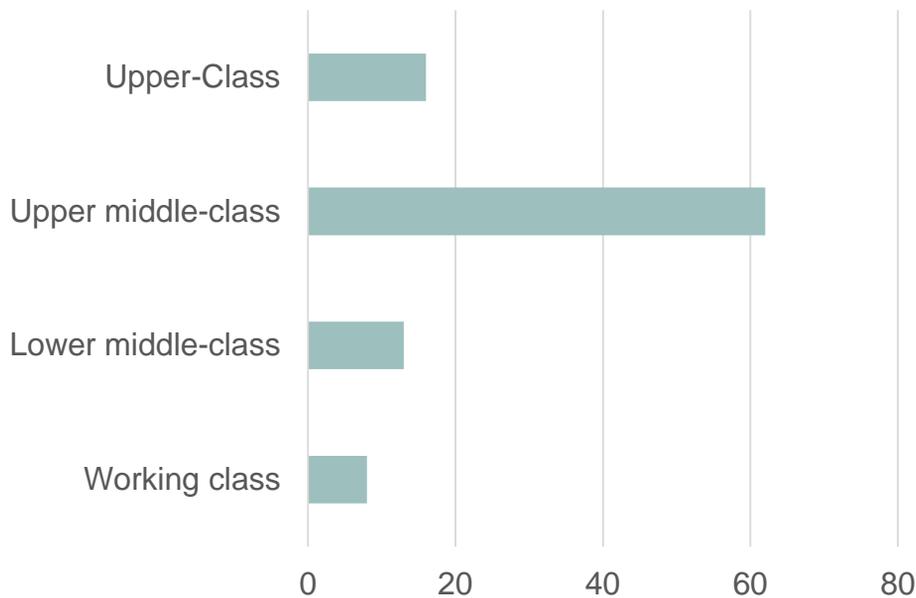
There were a total of fifty living children at date of most-successful publication across all sixty-nine of the writers examined for this project.

Spare a thought for Alice Meynell and Florence Marryat, who both had seven living children at the time that their best-known works were published!

Social class

From the women featured in our database, the average social class was:

Upper middle-class



Again, this category is very subjective and open to interpretation. The original three distinctions, upper, middle and lower class representing rich, average and poor respectively, proved impossible to impose with real data because of the social and cultural implications that underpin judgements of class and the shift in perceptions across the period.

Assessments were based on the following basic criteria:

Upper Class - Rich, well-educated, aristocratic/no need to work

Upper Middle Class - Comfortably-off, parents in professional job and well-educated, schooled or privately tutored

Lower Middle-class - less well-off and may have fallen on hard-times, parents educated, some schooling

Working Class - Need to work, limited education, labouring professions

Conclusion

Our survey results suggested that the 'average' Victorian woman writer was:

Aged in their thirties

Of average height, slim build, fair hair/skin and modestly dressed

Unmarried

Childless

Comfortably-off and middle-class

Wrote mostly fiction novels and cookbooks or etiquette guides

Our analysis of real writers indicated that the 'average' Victorian woman writer was:

Aged 37

Tall, slim build, dark hair/skin and neither modestly nor fashionably dressed

Unmarried

Childless

Comfortably-off and middle-class

Wrote mostly fiction novels, short-stories and poetry

The results of our comparison suggest that the general public's perception of Victorian women writers is largely factually accurate.



However, there is still lots more to be done to popularise lesser-known writers, to bring to the forefront the lives of women who were not your “average Josephine” and to encourage new audiences to engage with texts by Victorian women writers.



Of course, Victorian women writers were as diverse and varied as any other group of people. This project has illustrated that there does not seem to be any particular stereotype associated with female writers from this period. These are not black & white women but colourful, engaging, complex women beset with many of the same concerns that we have today.

The project also highlights the many and varied modern-day reactions to Victorian women writers which suggest we, as modern readers, are every bit as multifarious as they were. Our reading habits may have changed but characteristics and expectations transcend generations.

Limitations and Restrictions

This is not a scientific quantitative study but merely an amateur and localised poll for general interest only. The sample size and reference data are necessarily restricted by the nature of the project and would need to be greatly increased to track more general trends.

Moreover, the complexity of data and analysis is deliberately basic. There are infinite numbers of variables which would need to be taken into account on a larger scale.

Data has not been tracked against general population trends. It is likely that broad terms such as “upper-middle class” encompassed the greatest proportion of the population, hence this is not a qualitative analysis but merely a comparative survey.

Sources consulted are also likely to have been those most well-known or digitised. Rarer or less-accessible sources may produce widely different results. At some level, all of the judgements in this survey are subjective but that is the nature of reading and assessing. The results were a surprise to us too!

The most important thing is to keep discovering, keep questioning and keep reading. Sometimes we can analyse just for fun....



Acknowledgments

The ICVWW extends grateful thanks to all the delegates and participants of conferences and events hosted by the centre during the Brontë to Bloomsbury project. Without their research and enthusiasm, this project would not have been possible.

In the collaboration of research to build the ICVWW database I would like to personally thank the following scholars for their generosity:

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