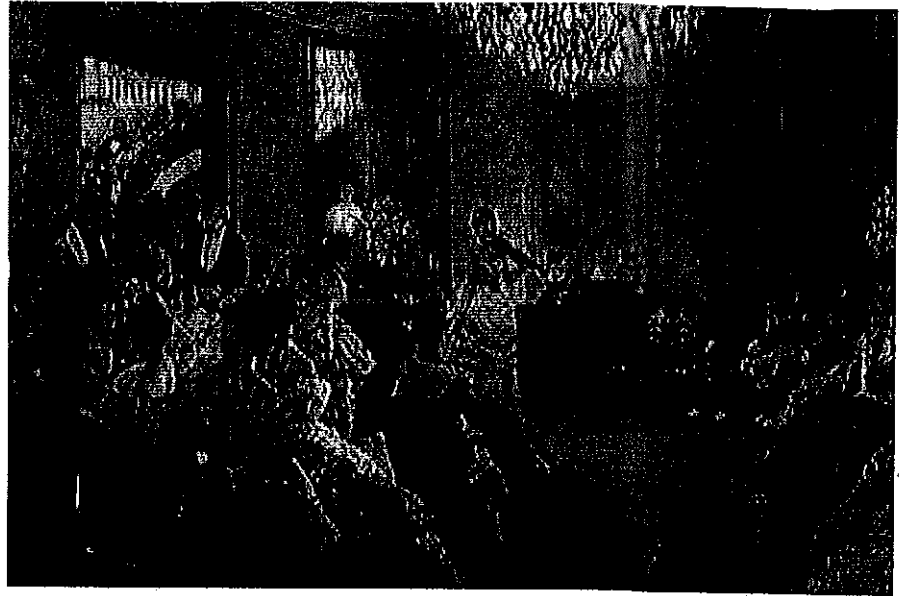
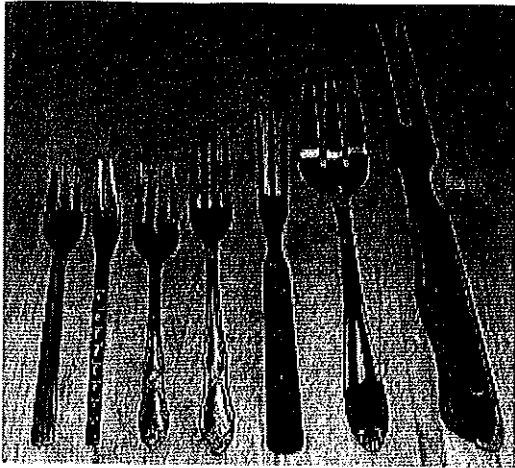


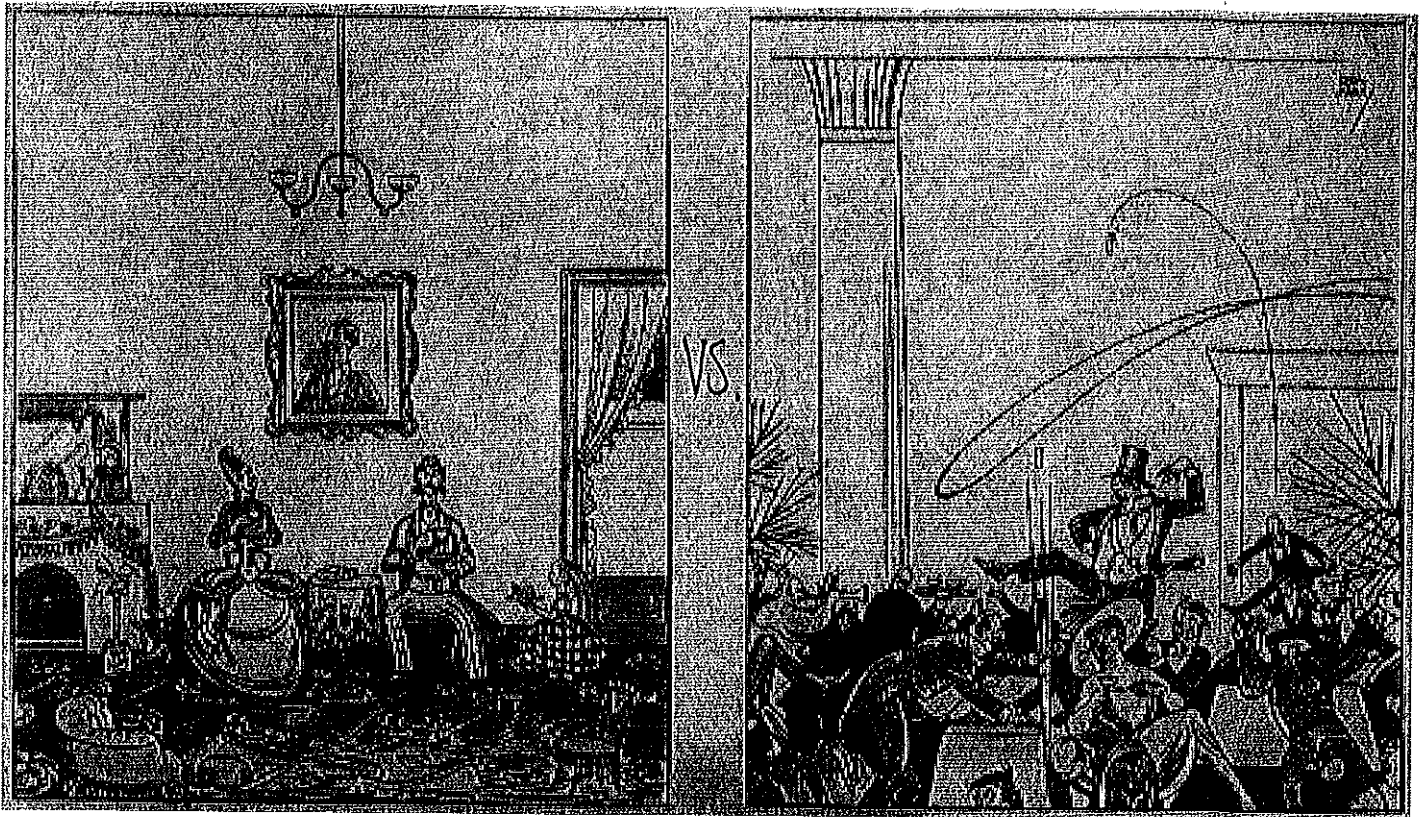
The Weird World of Victorian Etiquette & Bad Manners

Source: Wikimedia Commons



"The world was my oyster but I used the wrong fork." - Oscar Wilde

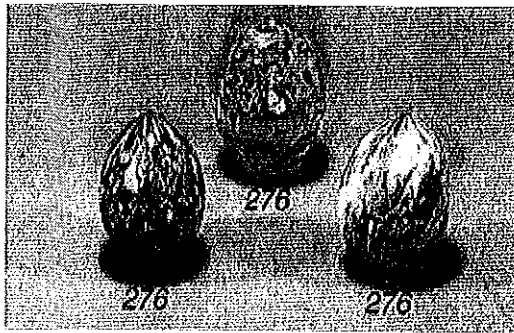
Etiquette? The Oxford Dictionary defines etiquette as: **the customary code of polite behavior in society or among members of a particular profession or group:**



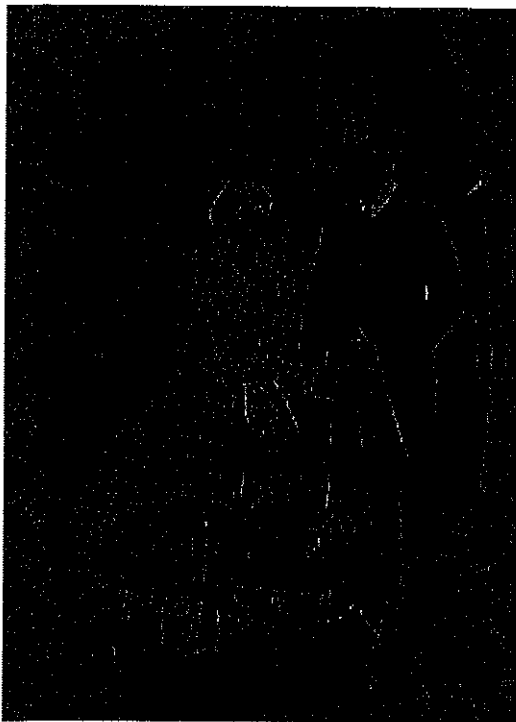
The codes of etiquette and good manners have been evolving for thousands of years. It's regarded as one the traits of civilized society. This maybe so, but when you look at the rule books of etiquette its like good manners gone mad! Some of the rules are silly and some downright bizarre!

Proper dress for the Victorian Lady from 1880's showing day wear and in the centre, evening wear

Source: Wikimedia Commons



Victorian hand coolers - prevented the social nightmare of a hot, sweaty handshake!



Etiquette rules for women in marriage and society

"There was a general whisper, toss, and wiggle, But etiquette forbade them all to giggle" - Lord Byron

For us modern women in the 21st century some of the following 'rules of etiquette' will seem perhaps quaint, but many are **chauvinistic**. So be warned, they might well have you either squirming in your seat or raging with indignation!

-It was the role of women to always be graceful, composed and refined.

-The main goal of female etiquette was to please the man.

-The dressing room of a woman was a sanctuary free from any male presence or influence. However, the use of the dressing room was to assist the woman to look good for her husband. This is where dress, hairstyles

and make-up would be tried and tested so that, "...the husband should always find the wife fresh, beautiful and sweet as a flower..".

-Women had a duty to look beautiful at all times but they must also ensure that "...they make it look like there was no effort at all..." It was also proper etiquette for the woman to always wear her hair up unless in the privacy of the bed chamber.

-The ideal Victorian woman was always busy and very able. According to many etiquette books, she could always draw strength from her "moral superiority".

-In Victorian society the main role of a lady was to serve others. This could take many forms from ensuring she was always beautiful and clean to holding dinner parties. In everything she did it had to be aimed at pleasing her husband and society.

-When a lady wanted to cross the street there were strict rules on which way to carry her dress. She must hold the dress slightly above the ankle, holding the folds with her right hand and drawing them towards the right. It was viewed as being **vulgar** to lift the dress with both hands as far too much ankle would be shown. However, ankles being shown was permitted for a few seconds when there was a lot of mud on the ground.

-During **courting** it was permitted for a man to bring gifts to the lady but they had to be of a particular kind - flowers or a book, perhaps sweets were also given. However, the lady could never give a present to a man until he had first given her a present. The presents given to the man had a strict code - they had to be artistic, handmade and not expensive.

-Single women in particular were never to participate in frolicking with a man where it might in anyway lead to being 'kissed or handled in anyway'. If a man wanted to admire a necklace for example, the woman had to remove it and hand it over for inspection. Under no circumstances was the item to be inspected while she wore it.

-In marriage a woman had no rights over own body. Her husband - with the full backing of church and law - could force sex and childbirth onto her and could use 'moderate' discipline for correcting a wife. He also inherited all her money and goods on marriage and was free to spend her wealth on mistresses, prostitutes, gambling, drink or whatever else took his fancy.

In law 'adultery' was not seen as a severe enough excuse for a wife to seek divorce from her husband. However, a man would succeed in getting a divorce if the wife had been the adulterer.

Some things never change! No matter how impractical or uncomfortable, if it makes you look good, wear it! The dreaded **corset** was almost like a torture instrument



Child Etiquette

"Good manners: The noise you don't make when you're eating soup." Bennett Cerf

I wonder what our 21st century kids would make of this? The following examples are taken from a child's book of etiquette, late Victorian period.

-Never talk back to older people especially your father and mother.

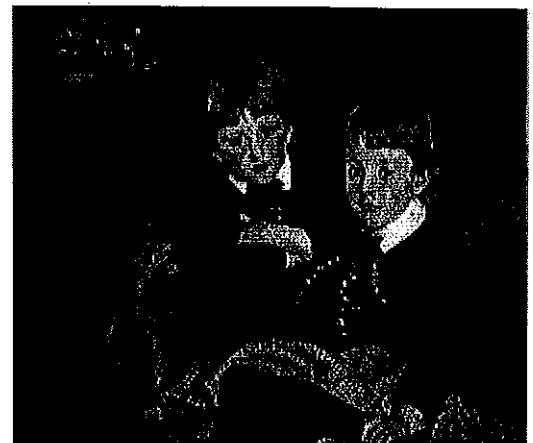
-Never whine or frown when spoken to by your elders.

-Never argue with your elders - they know best

-Never do anything that is forbidden by your elders

-Do as you are told in a pleasant and willing way

-Never contradict anyone in any way it is very impolite



-Always rise into a standing position when visitors arrive



-Never start a conversation with a visitor until they have started to speak

-Never interrupt a conversation

-Never allow your parents to bring you a chair and never allow them to get one for themselves. Wait on them, instead of being waited on.

-Never run up and down the stairs or across the room.

-Keep yourself clean and neat looking at all times.



Victorian etiquette for men

"Politeness, The most acceptable hypocrisy."

~Ambrose Bierce

-It wasn't just the women and kids who had to show breeding by displaying the rules of etiquette. Men had their own rules that they had to follow if they didn't want to be viewed as vulgar or become an outcast.

-It was bad manners to allow a lady to get herself a chair, pick up something she had dropped or ring the bell for servants while a gentleman was in the room. **Etiquette rules stated that these duties should be carried out by the man on her behalf.**

-A man always had to remove his hat when entering a room even if the room was empty. The only exception was if there was genuinely no place to put his hat.

-A very bad breach of etiquette was for a man to sit while a lady was left standing. He must immediately offer her the use of his own chair even if 'the gentleman has the best seat in the



room, he must offer it to a lady'. However, if his seat was warm from where he had been sitting, he must go and get another seat for the lady and not offer her the one that was still warm.

-If a man escorted a lady to the opera, ballet etc., he must remain seated with her during the performance and avoid talking while the performance was on.

-In one etiquette rule book it was firmly stated that "Showing affection in public was brazen vulgarity ."

-A famous Victorian point of etiquette was that "a gentleman should be seen and not smelled. They should use but little perfume as too much is in very bad taste".

-The Victorians were always hot on how, as they saw it, inferior people should be treated: "In the company of an inferior, never let him feel inferior. If you invite someone of an inferior class, such as an employee, treat him as you would another member present."

-In conversation a gentleman should never speak about himself or his self importance and only to speak with others on subjects they are interested in.

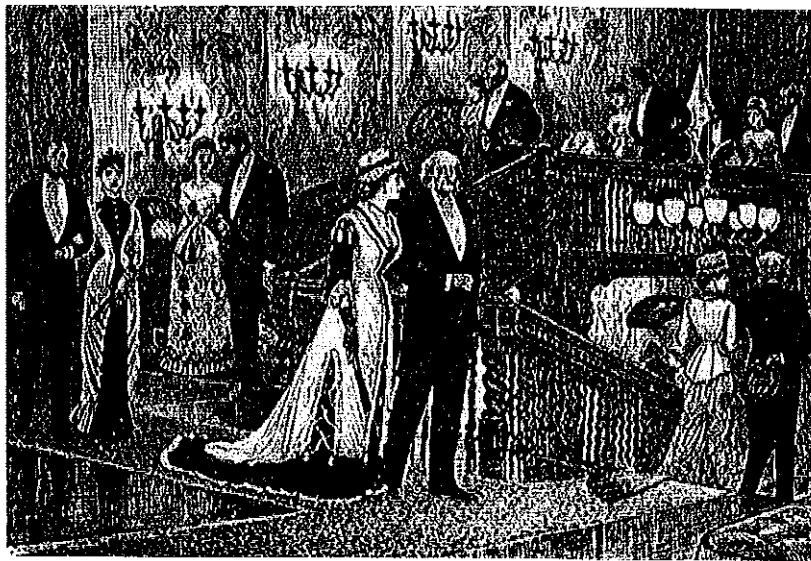
Safe subjects to talk about included - books, balls, bonnets, metaphysics, traveling, the weather.

-A gentleman was also expected to: "avoid showing his learning and accomplishments in the presence of ignorant, inferior or vulgar people - who can by no possibility understand or appreciate what is being said."

-It was considered bad manners and vulgar to ask a direct question. A Victorian gentleman could never ask for example "How is your Mother?" They had to put the question in another form such as "I hope your Mother is doing well? " But the gentleman also had to remember not to ask a lady about anything that might offend her or upset her.

-The gentleman must never use slang terms and phrases in polite company. These vulgar terms should only be used in bar rooms and other low places.

It was apparently bad manners and vulgar to joke at the expense of a lady.



Can We Learn Anything From The Victorians?

It's easy to **scoff** at society from the past. It's even easier to be enraged by them! But is there anything the Victorians can teach us? I think there are a few. For example **good manners**. Today there does seem to be a shift away from being polite towards rudeness and aggression being the accepted norm! We don't have to take 'etiquette' to the extreme. But having manners is a sign of respect for yourself as well as for others. So before we ridicule everything about the etiquette and traditions of the Victorians, pause for a moment and think about what they may have got right!