

Life For a Woman in the Mid 19th Century

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What was life like for a woman in mid-19th century America? Grab your parasol, your corset, and your heaviest perfume. Let's go traveling.

In this era, our lives will be shaped quite a lot by where we were born and in what circumstances. It's 1860, the year before the war got started. Imagine it: It's early morning, and dark outside the windows. Maybe you turn on an oil-burning lantern set beside the bed. You certainly don't have any electricity to work with: that wouldn't come until 1882, and even then most still used oil lanterns until the 1920s. You can use a modern match to light it, though, as those have been around for a couple of decades. Don't take too deep a whiff of what's in the lantern: it's probably whale fat. But at least it gives a nice, steady burn.

Maybe the maid has lit a fire in the grate to warm the room up. That maid might be white, or she may be black. If she's black, she might be a free woman, or she might be a slave. In the early 1800s, the U.S. passed legislation that barred citizens from either exporting slaves or participating in the international slave trade. But emancipation was a state by state decision, so while the slave trade was abolished in D.C. in 1849, it won't be until 1862 - a year after the war starts - that all African Americans in the city will be declared free.

It's winter, and cold. You can almost feel the nip of the air coming through the curtains. Are you keen for a hot shower to start your day? Me too, but no such luck. You'll be lucky to have a water closet at home with anything vaguely resembling a flushing toilet. Queen Elizabeth I had a flushing toilet installed around 1596, but that was way ahead of its time. The toilet didn't really take off until the invention of the S-bend toilet and the Industrial Revolution; but even then, indoor toilets weren't installed in many homes until the 1880s. That's partly because of the sewer situation.

The White House first got indoor plumbing 30 years ago, but most American cities don't yet have proper sewer systems. We're still working out hygiene and sanitation. So more than likely, since you're in the city and have money, you'll have a privy somewhere out the back of the house. But it's cold, so let's use a chamber pot - you know, that thing that looks like a fancy bedpan. It's either under the bed, or it might be discreetly tucked away in a piece of furniture with a fold-back lid. Fancy.

Anyway, we were talking about a shower. What we're more likely to have on hand is a sitz bath - basically it's a porcelain basin you'll sit in to immerse your more delicate parts - along with a wash basin and a bathtub. But you're probably not going to want to use the bathtub. First, because carting warm water into it by the bucketful is going to take a lot of time. Also, because washing too frequently will expose us to disease - or so the theory goes. In this era, we don't know much about germs yet. We're still working with the miasmatic theory of disease - the idea that it's "bad air" that makes people sick. So prepare yourself for drinking water that probably doesn't taste that great.

You do want to bathe - the doctors agree. But there's a way to do it. You don't want to bathe your whole body at once, because that'll strip away your body's natural defensive oils. Anyway, according to a book on female beauty from the 1840s:

Go ahead and take a quick sponge bath. Try not to enjoy it. A woman's sensitive regions should be explored as little as possible: the Bible says so. You wouldn't want to, as they say, "self-abuse" yourself by mistake. That might also cause insanity. Or finger warts, sterility, cancer, or droopy breasts.

If you have your period, I'm....Not really sure I can help you. Victorian ladies didn't leave behind helpful journal entries on what they did on heavy flow days. You're wearing a lot of layers, so maybe you do nothing. But there were some things you could buy - they look like garter belts with a wool rag attached covered in lard - that might do.

Have cramps? Definitely don't call the doctor. For one, their methods of helping you probably aren't going to help you. They might even make you worse. Plus, they don't really know much at all about how your body works. But more on women and medicine in a future episode.

You could try and wash your hair, but that takes a lot of time. Plus, says a beauty book from the 1840s, it's probably bad for you: "The practice...of washing the head with water, either warm or cold, requires considerable judgement: as from it, not unfrequently [sic] result headache, earache, toothache, and complaints of the eyes."

Anyway, the strong stuff you'd use to strip your hair of grease - like ammonia - is going to take layers of your scalp off and burn your nose holes. Same goes for conditioning your hair. I've found contemporary recipes that include bear grease, fox grease, goose grease, burnt and fresh butter, and white onions. Those aren't bad compared to, say, laudanum, charcoal, lead and liquid pitch, which you could use to dye your hair. Or you could just try this:

Let's put some super heavy perfumes on instead. That's how everyone masks their stink in this era. And with so little bathing happening, we're all bound to stink just a bit. It's Sunday, which means we're going to church. So let's get dressed in our Sunday

best. Pay attention, now. These clothes are going to play a major role in many of this season's dramas.

I can see you're searching bureau drawers for underwear - don't bother. You won't be wearing any. Instead, slip on your chemise, which is kind of like a light summer dress. Then slide on some stockings, probably wool ones, which you'll clip on with some garters. Now it's time for your drawers. These are, essentially, half or three-quarter length pants with a big slit running down the crotch seam. So, crotchless shorts. That's right - you'll be hanging in the breeze a bit. But you'll have so many long layers on that no one will notice. Just don't fall over.

Okay, so now let's put on a corset. I know what you're imagining: that scene from every Period film you've ever seen involving corsets, where someone strains to pull the strings so tight that ribs crack and breathing starts to feel unlikely. And yes, a lightly plump and curvy hourglass figure is popular here. But not everyone is striving for Scarlett O'Hara's 17-inch waist. Doctors of the day said that tightening them too much could cause all sorts of problems: consumption (naturally); hunchback, abortion, epilepsy. They were, confusingly, thought by some to be good for morals, but by others to be too exciting. They're constricting, to be sure, but most women probably aren't pulling them in super tightly. They're almost like bras or Spanx or the bodysuits: meant to smooth things out and keep them from jiggling. Victorians don't approve of things jiggling. There were corsets for every lady - even ones for pregnant women, built with flexibility in mind.

Okay, so you're cinched into your corset. Put on an under-petticoat. Now it's time for your cage crinoline. Picture a waist-height church bell. Better yet, picture a giant birdcage. This is your crinoline, and you're going to cinch it around your waist. What is this contraption for? It's to hold up the petticoats you'll be putting on over it, creating what's called a hoop skirt. The horizontal bars might be made of whalebone, but they're more likely to be made of steel. Invented by a Brit in the 1850s, steel versions could be made cheaply in factories. A year ago, in 1859, a factory in New York was making three or four thousand of these things a day. The more bars it has, the fancier the crinoline, as it's going to create a smoother skirt line.

Having fun yet? I've always thought that corsets and big, heavy skirts would be a punishment. I mean, this thing is literally called a 'cage'. But it turns out that women of almost all classes and stations wear hoop skirts in mid-century America. Why? It wasn't just about fashion. Think of it this way. Before hoop skirts, women were wearing upwards of six heavy petticoats to try and puff up their outfits and preserve their modesty, which would get all tangled up around their legs. Having a crinoline means that you only have to wear one petticoat. It ALSO means that your legs are free to move. You can walk, stretch - you can spread eagle under there, and no one is going to be able to see you do it. Though you probably shouldn't do that if a stout breeze is

blowing. Imagine how good that would feel to women who are used to drowning in layers.

But there are women of your station wearing something else. Suffragette Amelia Bloomer thought women should just wear pants. Well, not pants - pantaloons, which had a short, balloony skirt and full pant legs, allowing her more freedom to move. It's from her we get the word 'bloomers'. But more on politics later. You're still halfway naked.

Now put on another petticoat and, finally, your dress, which will be high necked with buttons up the front, and long sleeves. Do your crotchless pants make more sense now? Can you imagine trying to take off underwear with all these layers on? Or trying to use an outhouse toilet with that cage on? I didn't get married in a big puffy dress, but for those of you who did...you feel me. Even so, I feel 100% confident I will fall over in this thing at some point. Or light myself and others on fire, which is actually a serious concern.

That is a serious issue with the style of this era - your likelihood of doing one or both of those things is hugely heightened. You run the risk of knocking things off shelves, of getting stuck in carriage doors, or being lit up by an open fire. Cartoons of the era made fun of this very thing - and the possibility for streetside flashing - but the hoops weren't nearly as huge as some cartoons and paintings of the era paint them. We're talking an average circumference of around five-and-a-half or six yards.

You're now covered from neck to wrist to ankle. I mean, we're going to church, not a dinner party. Even with the crinoline, we're wearing a lot of underthings. Why so many? For one, because your dress has probably never been washed. And never will. That's because it's handmade and the dyes and fabrics are delicate, while the soaps of the time are filled with harsh corrosive ingredients like lye. But your white underthings, made of linen or cotton, can be washed. So can those white ruffs you've attached to your neckline and sleeves. Worried about pit stains? I am. But don't worry: there are little pit pads you can buy and wedge under your dress for that.

Now you'll do your hair and makeup. Well, actually, you won't do your makeup. Makeup is only for actresses and ladies of the evening. It's mostly horrible stuff, anyway, filled with things like lead and belladonna and the same stuff you'd use to make ink. You could try some of the recipes suggested by beauty books of the day for potions and balms to improve your skin. Wax mixed with spermaceti, anyone? Or maybe Balm of Mecca, which will probably blow your face up a few sizes.

Okay. So lace up your very tight boots, using a fancy hook to cinch up all the tiny buttons. Let's walk downstairs and into our sphere. The woman's sphere.

Mid-19th century America was right in the middle of the Victorian age. Named after queen Victoria, that grand dame of the English throne whose influence made its way over to America and permeated American life.

It might seem strange that America would turn back to its former mother country for cultural guidance, but remember: America is still quite young. It's been less than 100 years since it became an independent nation, and it's still figuring out what it is and wants to be. It's worth noting, though, that while America may sometimes turn to its old Mother Country for social guidance, many artists and thinkers are cutting ties with the Old World. They're falling in love with the American landscape, creating distinctly American myths. This is the age of the Transcendentalists and American Romantics like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson. America even has its own dictionary, compiled by Noah Webster, that works to separate American English from the British version from whence it came.

Though Victoria was a strong-ass woman, a shaper of views and a runner of monarchies, her thoughts on a woman's place in the world were pretty narrow. In response to the rise of the women's suffrage movement, she wrote:

Queen Victoria, disapproving of our desire to vote. Easy for you to say, when you rule everything!

Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum

Instead, she believed in something that came to be known as the Cult of True Womanhood. The idea that society ran best when women and men had their different duties, split up into separate spheres.

A man's sphere was the public one: a 'true man' was supposed to create and manage wealth. A woman's sphere was the private one. Marriage was her job; bearing and educating children her sacred duty. A true woman was virtuous, gentle, domestic. It was up to her to make 'home' into a refuge from what felt like a fast-changing world. And it IS changing quickly. We're on the cusp of a second Industrial Revolution, and we've invented the items and processes that will change much about the way we live: engines, rubber vulcanization, electricity, factory production. Cities on the East Coast are getting bigger fast, particularly in the Northeast, with factories employing newly invented marvels like the sewing machine, in a time when most clothing was hand sewn. This industry boom brought immigrants to America, especially Irish and Germans, who have been flooding into the country for the last couple of decades. From 1820 to 1870, over seven and a half million immigrants came to the United States — more than the entire population of the country in 1810. With the West opening up and expanding and populations blooming, America isn't what it was in 1776.

So why has such a powerful woman locked us into a life of hearth and home? Well, she doesn't see it like that. Think of it this way: in order for society to function well, the theory goes, everyone has to play a certain role. Someone has to make the money, and someone has to raise the children and keep things at home running smoothly. For those with money, that isn't just to make the home a happy place. It's to help her husband, and thus her family, get ahead in life. Before online networking and email introductions, important connections were often made at dinner parties and functions. The home is an office of sorts - a way for the upperly mobile to display their wealth. A well-kept house is an advertisement for success. A dinner filled with many different kinds of forks matters.

In this way, men and women complement each other. And anyway, don't these roles reflect our true natures? A TRUE MAN is aggressive, competitive, rational. A TRUE WOMAN is pure, pious, submissive and domestic. That's nature.

My modern mind rebels, of course. But this isn't about women being stupid and weak and men being strong and capable. Consider this passage from the 1856 edition of Godey's Lady's Book, the most popular monthly magazine of its day and mostly written by, and aimed at, women:

To really understand this period, we have to talk about religion. An overwhelming number of people here are Protestant, and their views on how to live really dominates the attitudes and cultural framework of this time. Christianity informs a lot about how people look at their lives and their roles here. It's so deeply ingrained in the fabric of life that it's transcended the boundaries of religion to permeate general systems of belief. For a woman to be pious, virtuous and a moral pillar was more than a religious goal: for the upper and middle classes particularly, it was a marker of good breeding and good social standing.

But more than that, it helps to explain why some women - even the majority of women - don't publicly support women's suffrage. According to the Christian mores of the time, marriage fuses man and wife. They are as one; his opinions are hers, and thus he speaks for her.

I imagine that this emphasis on seeing society through a religious lens is what helped spawn what I call the 'angel or Jezabel' model - it seems like women were often cast in biblical terms, where they were either devoted and chaste, or harlots. Did some man make advances on you in the street? Well, you probably were swirling your parasol like a harlot. Did he sneer at you? You were probably laughing too loud. You harlot. So, that whole 'she asked for it' argument we're still grappling with in our century.

A woman's moral strength is so important that she can actually redeem sinners - so, important to the greater good of all. And maybe that's why so much importance is placed in this era on protecting a woman's virtue. We wouldn't want to offend her virgin ears. So 'undergarments' are called 'unmentionables' or nether garments or sit-down-upons. We don't single out arms and legs - we call them 'limbs'. That's why, as we leave the house for church, we'll be walking with a mother or father or married sister, protected at all times from anything that might tarnish your innocent soul.

That was the dream anyway. In practice, I can't imagine any woman managed it. Anyway, the cult of true womanhood only applies to us in this scenario because we're white and of the middle or higher class. Slaves, immigrants, the poor, native Americans, free black women, were all knocked out of the running just by being what they were. Their lives looked very little, or nothing, like what we're experiencing now. But we'll walk in some of their shoes later.

Let's walk to church. Make sure to put on your gloves and hat before going outside, though. Putting on gloves in the street makes you look like a hussy, and we're responsible for making sure men don't look at us in a sexual manner.

The first thing you'll probably notice about the nation's capital is that everything is covered with a thin layer of grime. We will be, too. Pretty much everything not powered by oil is being powered by coal, and there are no environmental regulations to govern it. So everything is sooty and a little grimy. So really, it's a good thing we're wearing those boots. You'll be stepping in things you won't want to think about too hard.

Let's pause to talk about Washington City for a minute, as we'll be visiting it quite a lot this season. It was only made the capital of the growing nation in 1790, meant as a meeting place at the line between north and south. It was built on a swamp, to begin with, which means it's buggy in summer and boggy the rest of the time. Plus it's grown haphazardly, with fancy hotels like the Willard on one street and timber houses lining others. The National Mall, where you'll find stately museums and many people throwing footballs in our century, is actually a very foul-smelling canal.

As you walk, you'll likely see carriages trying not to hit stray pigs and dogs. The streets are muddy, and depending on where you are, probably smells like trash. While we're walking, let's enjoy some of the delightful slang words we might hear in passing.

HEDGE-CREEPER (N). A PROSTITUTE.

WAGTAIL (N). A PROMISCUOUS WOMAN.

FLAPDOODLE (N). A SEXUALLY INCOMPETENT MAN; OR JUST 'NONSENSE'.

BY THE HORN SPOONS! AN EXCLAMATION OF SURPRISE, SHOCK, OR ANGER.

GALLNIPPER (N). IT SOUNDS BAD, BUT REALLY IT JUST MEANS MOSQUITO.

Anyway. So now we're in Church. Oh, look, there's Tom Hiddleston, who has also travelled back in time with us - I never travel without him - and is now sporting a truly spectacular beard. You're pretty keen on him as a marriage prospect, but you can't actively pursue him. You have to let him come to you. Being too forward might cause a man to lose his manliness and a woman to lose her supple, moral essence. Also, brazen flirting makes you look like a Jezabel. Looseness speaks to an addled mind, and no man wants to hitch himself to that wagon.

A woman's place in this century can be tenuous. There are certain mistakes you won't be able to come back from. One fall from grace is all it takes to end up unmarriageable, which would be horrible. Because as a woman, there are only so many ways you can support yourself.

But since we have some money, we can afford to end up spinsters at the age of 25. It won't look great, but it's workable. Not so for women born in less stable financial situations. For those women - the majority of women - they might be maids or cooks. They might be farmers or laborers or shop assistants. They might be a healer or a midwife, but not a doctor, although medical schools for women aren't far off. They might be factory workers, though you best believe the pay is bad and decidedly less than what men are making. And then, of course, you could be a prostitute. But I wouldn't recommend it. It's not a glamorous life, and your chances of getting a venereal disease is pretty high. Things were a bit different in the West, where things were still taking shape, but we're on the East Coast. And that means that your best bet for a secure life is to get married. It's the safest course, at least as far as your finances are concerned.

So let's talk about women's rights for a minute. In this age, women can't vote - not even close. Why? Because that falls into the men's sphere. Also, because our husbands will obviously vote for us.

This takes us back the Christian ideals that are ingrained in our culture. If you join your life with Tom's, you're entering in to a contract. Victorian society is romantic, and is all for you marrying for love if you can, but it's still a contract in which you essentially give up your citizenship. As an essay from the 1790s puts it, a lady has the luxury of being

able to “cheerfully submit to the government of their own chusing [sic]”. You can’t enter into other contracts, sign legal papers: you can’t be held responsible for yourself.

But that’s not to say that women aren’t fighting for their legal rights, because they definitely are. 12 years ago, Elizabeth Cady Stanton organized the first convention for women's rights in Seneca Falls, New York, where ladies talked about wanting many things - equal pay, improved child custody arrangements (they tend to go directly to the father’s family in the case of divorce), career opportunities in law and medicine and beyond. They laid out all of the things that women in America were being denied: Women’s rights titans like Lucretia Mott and Susan B. Anthony were operating in this period. But it’ll be another another sixty years or so before women can vote. 60 years. How crazy is that?

On that cheerful note, let’s focus back in on our marriage prospect, Tom Hiddleston. How to woo him? You’ll likely have been taught to sing, maybe play an instrument, speak a little French or Italian, and to do basic household things like sewing.

Some women did go to school, but usually only until the age of 12. If they had the money and the freedom to continue, they might learn Latin, French and Greek, math and history and philosophy. But mostly you would have been taught to be innocent and sweet. Because remember: Educating women can be dangerous. This isn’t an extreme view: F.C. Fowler, a respected doctor and Harvard professor, wrote that going to college was more harmful to women than factory work - which is to say, extremely. It puts too much strain on our female brains. He warned that if women kept on insisting on college, the whole country would be sterile by 1910. Wait: have we gotten trapped inside the Handmaid’s Tale? No? Sorry, I got confused for a minute.

Tom will need to go through your parents, of course, as you can’t be alone with a man who isn’t related to you (even a first cousin; the Queen DID marry hers, you know). That said, you’ll have a chance to get to know him at dinners, dances, and other social outings. You may even exchange some letters. In an age before Tinder, this is the main form of communication over short and long distances.

Let’s ignore Tom for a minute and talk about communication. The main ways to travel are by foot, by carriage, by horse, by steamer or by railroad. Think of how much farther apart everything is than what we’re used to. Because we have money, we’re more likely to travel long distances. But for a lot of women in this period, they are never going to travel that far outside of the place they were born. So it would seem, through our eyes, that most women’s views of the world at this time is a small one. But the railroad and the electric telegraph, both of which first appeared in the 1830s, are revolutionizing our view of the world and our ability to travel through it.

With printing technology becoming cheaper and transportation becoming faster and broader, Victorian America is becoming a much more intimate place. In the mid-19th century, both commercialized envelopes and stamps are a relatively new thing, and the idea of mail order isn't here yet, but it's brewing. More than a 1,000 newspapers are reaching millions of readers across the United States. Letters can tell you a lot about a person, and are a place you can get a little more bold. There are even advice guides published about such letters. Writing letters with Tom might be a slower, but just as torturous version of flirting via text. When he says, as this real life letter writer did: "Every time I think of you my heart flops up and down like a churn dasher..."

...does he mean "I love you" or "I like the way your flesh jiggles"? Either way, you have to figure out if he's really going to be a good match - because his status and gentlemanly virtues are going to determine a lot of the comforts and privileges you can expect to enjoy.

Let's say all goes well and you're getting married. Try and imagine what the wedding night might be like. Women have been taught all their lives to feel ashamed of sexual urges, encouraged not really to know their own bodies, and that pleasure is an embarrassment. Up until now, you'll have maybe enjoyed a kiss with this person you're lying down with, and neither one of you is likely to know much about how sex works. Of course, there are many guidebooks to help you through this. Like *The Lover's Marriage Lighthouse*, a popular book published in 1858, which says that "a wife must first fertilize the husband with her eyes" in a process called 'spiritual impregnation'. Maybe that's why we're not supposed to look directly at strange men in the street...have you impregnated anyone with your eyes today?

Here's the thing about the 19th-century marriage contract: because you are essentially sighing yourself over to your husband, you're giving him consent forevermore to have sex with you whenever he likes. In 1857, a case called *Commonwealth v. Fogerty* officially recognized the "contract defense" for cases of marital rape. You did marry Tom of your own free will: you knew what that meant, right? He can also divorce you if you won't consent. But more on that later. For now, let's try and enjoy ourselves.

So what about birth control? I mean, it's our duty to bear Tom Hiddleston's children, so you probably aren't going to worry about that. And you're probably already pregnant, and going to spend a lot of time being so. But if you want to do some family planning, withdrawal made sense, though some 'experts' - they're all men, it seems - say it'll make you sterile. There are a couple of other forms of contraception: The first diaphragm was patented in the 1840s, called "The Wife's Protector", though apparently it didn't work. Hence its sweet little nickname, 'The Wife's Tormentor'. There's the rhythm method, too, but that won't have worked very well, because the wisdom of the day is that you should avoid sex before and during your period - so, precisely the opposite of accurate. Abstaining, too, is effective, but not overly popular.

Alright, fast forward: you're pregnant. Strap on your pregnancy corset and let's talk about this. The average woman in America at this time is having around six children, though since we're fairly well to do, we'll probably have less.

You're going to have this baby at home, as is common. You'll probably be attended by a male doctor, who probably will keep the room dark so as not to offend anyone's modesty and hasn't washed his hands. But you might also just have woman midwives. Which is good, because they probably understand how to help you better than a male doctor will. You're married to Tom, so this isn't something you'll have to think about, but for unmarried women in labor, their midwife was often someone they confessed to. If you called out the name of the father while giving birth, he'd probably be made to marry you later. People tended to think that whatever you said in that moment of excruciating pain was likely to be true...

What about pain management, you ask? Well, there was ether and chloroform. Queen Victoria used chloroform for one of her later deliveries in the 1850s, so it should be acceptable for us to use. Though some people say you shouldn't, as women were supposed to suffer: they bear the 'curse of Eve', and all that. Childbirth is less dangerous mid century than it was in the early part of the 1800s, when in the South 1 in 25 women died during the act. But it's still a worry, because there are a lot of conditions doctors don't understand. The biggest issue is infection from unclean hands and instruments. Many women get something called puerperal fever - a down-there infection also called childbed fever, which doctors don't understand and which often leads to unpleasant death.

A big issue was child mortality. At this point in the century, you have about 40% of children dying by the age of five. You had to worry about a whole host of diseases: tuberculosis, pneumonia, yellow fever, cholera, smallpox, diphtheria, and typhoid fever. Consider this: three of Abraham Lincoln's four children died before they hit adulthood, two of disease (typhoid fever and consumption, which...the catch-up term for 'we don't know'). That's why people tended to have several: you just couldn't be sure how many would live a full life.

Other than having babies, you're going to be managing your household, going to church, managing the family social life, and keeping correspondence. You're also planning dinners and other social engagements, which can involve a confusing amount of etiquette and an extreme number of forks.

Pasteurization arrived in the 1850s, but it's not really being practice in a widespread way. Canning is a thing, but it still wasn't something you could rely on not to be spoilt. Your diet is made up primarily of white flour, corn, salt, grease, and meat. There'll be vegetables around too, depending on what you can grow or buy at the market, but vegetarianism is most certainly a fringe diet in this era. Ice harvesting is at its most

competitive right about now, so you should be able to make some attempt at refrigeration. But with questionable water sources and days-old meat, you still have to be in charge of worrying about dyspepsia: or, in other words, seriously upset stomach problems that might, in 19th-century parlance, leave you feeling 'all-overish.'

Obviously, Tom is a glorious and progressive husband. But let's say you're having idle thoughts about divorce. What does that look like? Well, it's going to be hell for your reputation. You might as well start wearing around a big scarlet H - you know what that stands for. HARLOT. But if you feel strongly about it, you'll have to prove to a male judge that you're a morally upstanding paragon and that your husband is violent, a raging drunk, or insane. Even then, he's more likely than you are to get custody of the children. Children are the father's property, you know. Just like you!

OK. So you, me and Tom Hiddleston have been here in D.C. for about a year, making babies and trying to blend in with the times. But it's 1861 now, and that means that the civil war is here.

Explaining the Civil War is both incredibly simple and complicated. Boiled down, the war was about slavery: as a moral issue, for sure, but also as an economic and political one. The South claimed that they had the right to state sovereignty - to control their own destiny, which for them meant deciding how their economy was to be run. They felt the north meant to rule over them. The North wanted them to accept that the Union mattered more than individual state rights. We'll talk about the stew of conflicts and political moves that led to war in other episodes, but suffice it to say that it's been brewing for several decades, getting ever more intense as these three parts of the country - North, South, and the expanding West - became increasingly at odds in their views on what the country should look like. What made it even more complicated was that not everyone in the North believed in Union above all OR in abolishing slavery, and not everyone in the South believed in secession and the right to own slaves.

For a modern-day comparison, look at the election maps of Trump's and Clinton's Americas created by the New York Times in 2016. They paint a picture of how divided the country was at the time of that election, but also how confusingly patched those divisions were. Imagine the same kind of map applied in 1861: two countries, divided North and South, but lots of patchy bits throughout. When historians say that this war pitted brother against brother, neighbor against neighbor, they aren't exaggerating.

But how did this impasse turn into four years of brother shooting brother (and sometimes sister)? It helps to remember how big a part religion has to play in how both sides felt about the conflict. The North felt they were following god's plan by spreading democracy and preserving the Union; the South thought they were making that union more perfectly in line with god's plan. God, country, reputation and the notion of sacrifice are all bound up together in a messy and confusing tangle.

Let's put aside the 'whys' of the war for now and focus in on what it means for women. For one, it ripped their families apart. Let's think about where we are, geographically. Washington, D.C. is right at the dividing line between north and south, with Confederate Virginia on one side and wants-to-be-Confederate, but the Union won't let me Maryland. Families and friends here find themselves ripped between the two causes. Take First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln. Her much loved brother in law, Benjamin Hardin Helm, was a general in the Confederate army. For women like her, no matter which side won, she was bound to lose something that mattered.

But as the war begins, women on both sides are filled with as much fervor for their cause as the men are. There are men who don't want to serve, and women who are mad as hell about it. In Ohio, volunteer numbers were so low at one point that a bunch of young ladies "stepped forward and requested to have their names enrolled as volunteers in defence of their country and their rights, and said, as soon as they could be furnished with uniforms, they would leave their clothing to the young men, who lacked the manliness to defend the flag of their country when it was assailed." A Mrs. Black of Boston was conscripted by mistake, but she still showed up to roll call, telling them that she "wished no substitute".

In the South, women are practically pushing men out the door and into the arms of the Confederate military. They sing songs with titles like "I am Bound to be a Soldier's Wife or Die an Old Maid." Newspapers printed cartoons of girls in pants holding guns standing over their beloved, saying: "Either you or I, sir."

As women, most of our war work will be run from home. We'll organize aid societies to supply the troops with what they need: we'll bake food and can it; we'll sew clothing and blankets, and perhaps collect cash going door to door. We'll sell things at fairs and bazaars, too, though there are men who think that: "It merely looks unbecoming for a women to stand behind a table and sell things."

At the beginning, it was easy enough to be patriotic. Everyone thought the war would be over in a couple of months. But months turn into years, and women deeply feared they'd be left widows, or would never get the chance to marry at all.

Let's talk about scale. The American Revolution saw 30,000 men become soldiers, while the Civil War saw almost 3 million. The death toll is estimated around 620,000 people - more than the total American fatalities both both world wars, the Mexican war, the Korean war, the War of 1812 and the Spanish-American war combined. We're talking 2% of the population - that would be more than 6 million people today.

No matter what you think of the Southern cause, you can't help but feel for them. 3 out of 4 white men fought in the war. 1 in 5 didn't survive it. Imagine what that meant for women with few job prospects, to be left without a wage-earning husband and, perhaps, his debts.

Around 50,000 civilians died in the war, too. The first civilian casualty of the war was actually a woman. Too old to leave her cabin, she was shot through the wall by a stray bullet at the First Battle of Bull Run. As the war ground on, it took a huge toll on women. They found themselves running households and farms without help and without a lot of money. In the South, where most of the action happened, they had to face the threat of violence as well as grief. As supplies dwindled, some women and children were starving.

In the south and west, some towns got invaded and taken over multiple times before the war was out. With stories of terrible rapes and pillages, you have women in the South who are seriously afraid of what might happen to them in a war zone, particularly with so few men left behind. Many started carrying guns in their purses, sure that they would have to defend their virtue. In the first half of this episode, we were talking about crinolines and codes of conduct. So imagine the terror seeing this kind of violence would strike in your heart.

Imagine having to sit at home and wait and worry about your family and your fortunes. Imagine being in the South, watching your world turned into a war zone. Imagine being a black woman, enslaved or free, watching the battle for your very life being waged as you hover in its crosshairs, and feeling utterly unable to change your fate. Except some women do change their fate - as well as the fate of the war, and maybe even of the country. They'll step outside the confines of what's expected of them, doing more and being more, than ever before. They'll matter in a whole lot of surprising, age-defying ways. I can't wait to introduce them to you.