

Muscular Christianity in 19th-Century Periodicals

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INTRODUCTION

Muscular Christianity, Gender Roles, and Victorian England

As Victorian culture transitioned from the lavish and progressive Regency Era values of the early 19th-century to comparatively ascetic values of the Victorian Era, the idea of **Muscular Christianity** became increasingly popular. Muscular Christianity used traditional and often highly-gendered ideas of Christian morality to interpret boys' physical embodiment of masculinity. This produced a model for socially acceptable masculine development that involved cultivating **three** major facets of the self in order to establish a proper masculine identity:



Physical Strength

+



Intelligence

+

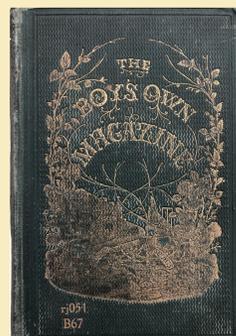
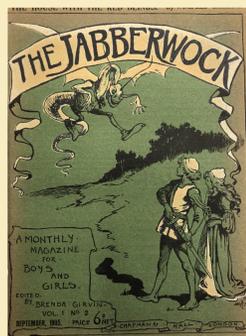


Moral Goodness

METHODS

Working with the Elizabeth Nesbitt Collection

The Elizabeth Nesbitt Collection, located within the University of Pittsburgh's Department of Special Collections, contains more than 12,000 pieces of children's literature and related material dating from the 1600s to present day. This research draws upon several Victorian Era **juvenile periodicals** from the Nesbitt Collection as well as supplemental periodicals and materials directed towards Victorian women and mothers.



FINDINGS

Nature, Imperialism, and Victorian Gender Norms

A few interesting and related observations can be made based on the Muscular Christian ideals presented to boys and women in these periodicals:

NATURE

Ideas of physical strength and courage become tied to ideas of exploring or conquering nature, suggesting that these materials are designed to prime boys for adulthood in an Imperialist culture.

IMPERIALISM

People of other races, particularly those in areas the British were either colonizing or interested in colonizing, are constructed as Other--making them out to be strange and often lesser.

GENDER ROLES

By warning boys of the dangers of feminine behavior and constructing women as untouchable, saint-like figures, these texts draw clear lines between appropriate male and female behavior.

DISCUSSION

Understanding Victorian Gender Norms Via Masculine Formation

Recent scholarship has focused on historicizing and re-historicizing femininity in the Victorian Era, but without understanding the nuance of masculine identity in the latter half of the 19th-century our understanding of gender dynamics, gendered conflicts, and gender representation in Victorian literature and culture would be incomplete. For that reason, it is important to take into consideration the social pressures surrounding issues of masculine formation and examine how the tension between male and female roles and expectations unfolded both in this time period and across literary and social history.



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Images courtesy of the Elizabeth Nesbitt Collection.