

Love and relationships in Victorian art



The Wounded Cavalier by William Shakespeare Burton, 1855

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Introduction

Where do our ideas about love and relationships come from? Many of them are still influenced by how people in the 19th and early 20th century thought. Let's go on a journey to examine our ideas of love and relationships using artworks in the Guildhall Art Gallery's collection.

How to use these resources

Images of artworks in the Guildhall Art Gallery's collections are accompanied by some explanatory text and some questions for discussion in the classroom. Each page has a new artwork with a link to a particular theme represented by a word or phrase.

Over to you

Respectful relationships, including friendships: the characteristics of positive and healthy friendships/relationships

Show students this painting, explaining that the Puritans/Roundheads and Royalists/Cavaliers fought each other in the English Civil War of the 17th century, and then with the following questions:

- What do you think happened to the Cavalier (the man who is wounded)? Look for clues.
- What do you think the Puritan (man in black) is thinking?
- What is the Puritan's relationship with the woman, do you think?
- Role play the conversation that takes place just after this moment.
- Do you think the Puritan has the right to tell the woman not to look after the Cavalier?

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Clytemnestra by John Collier, 1882.

© Guildhall Art Gallery, City of London Corporation

Sweet but psycho

In Greek myth Clytemnestra was the wife of Agamemnon, commander of the Greek forces which besieged Troy during the Trojan Wars. Before setting sail for home, Agamemnon sacrificed their youngest daughter Iphigenia to ensure a favourable wind for his fleet. When he returned home, he returned with his lover, the prophetess Cassandra, the captured daughter of King Priam of Troy. Enraged and grieving, Clytemnestra and her own lover murdered them both in revenge. This painting shows her just after the murders, looking defiant and still holding the murder weapon.

Over to you

Respectful relationships, including friendships: how stereotypes can cause damage

This is an extreme and horrific story, but it is images like this that focus on the woman and portray her as 'crazy', no matter what her partner has done to her, that push a damaging stereotype. Discuss why this stereotype endures, who benefits from perpetuating it and what damage it does to relationships.

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The Eve of Saint Agnes by William Holman Hunt, 1848

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Whirlwind romance

This painting illustrates an episode from John Keats's poem of 1819, *The Eve of St Agnes*, when Madeline and her lover Porphyro escape from her father's house during the festivities on St Agnes' Eve. Traditionally, this is the night of 20 January. In popular folklore, young women were said to pray to the saint on this night (Agnes is patron saint of young unmarried women) and their future husband would appear to them in a dream. In Keats' poem, Porphyro, knowing the folk tale as well, had slipped into Madeline's room in the middle of the night to be the man she saw in her dream. When Madeline realises it is not a dream, she still agrees to run away with Porphyro.

Over to you

Intimate and sexual relationships, including sexual health: how to recognise the characteristics and positive aspects of healthy one-to-one intimate relationships

Explain the story behind this painting and ask the following questions:

- Do you think this is a healthy relationship? Explain your answer.
- This was considered a very romantic story in the Victorian times. Do you agree?

Can students identify any other stories that are considered romantic today that they see a different way?

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La Ghirlandata by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1873

© Guildhall Art Gallery, City of London Corporation

It's complicated

Rossetti painted this picture while he was staying at Kelmscott Manor, the Oxfordshire house he part-owned with his friend William Morris, following his breakdown in 1872. Morris stayed away, but his wife Jane - with whom Rossetti was having an affair - was there. The model for the picture was not, as was often the case, Jane Morris herself but a model, Alexa Wilding, who arrived at Kelmscott in June 1873. The angel heads at the top were painted from Jane's ten-year-old daughter May, who was said to dislike Alexa intensely.

Over to you

The Law: Pupils should be made aware of the relevant legal provisions when relevant topics are being taught e.g. divorce

Explain about Rossetti's complicated love life. While affairs do still happen today, in the 19th century it was much more prevalent because a divorce was difficult to obtain. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 made divorce easier, but still expensive at £40 (over £4000 in today's money). The Church of England blocked further reforms until the final breakthrough came with the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973. Discuss the pros and cons of making divorce easier.

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The Woodsman's Daughter by John Everett Millais, 1850

© Guildhall Art Gallery, City of London Corporation

Power imbalance

Millais depicts a scene from a poem written by his friend, Coventry Patmore, in 1844. Patmore's poem tells of two children - the low-ranking woodman's daughter, Maud, and the wealthy squire's son - beginning a secret friendship. After some years the boy takes advantage of Maud, a poor girl he can abandon without consequence. She gets pregnant and is consumed by shame. Unwed mothers were frowned upon in the 19th century. Maud eventually drowns her child and is driven mad by grief.

Over to you

Intimate and sexual relationships, including sexual health: how to recognise the characteristics and positive aspects of healthy one-to-one intimate relationships

Explain the story behind the painting. It is often interpreted as a story of forbidden love ending in tragedy. Do your students agree with that interpretation? What are the signs the artist has left in the painting that this might not be a healthy loving relationship? (e.g. the stick the young boy holds for whipping animals, the bird feathers at his feet from an animal he has hit, his expression.)

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Pleading by Lawrence Alma-Tadema, 1876

© Guildhall Art Gallery, City of London Corporation

A nice guy

In this imaginative painting Alma-Tadema imagines a man pleading with a woman in ancient Rome to either marry him or sleep with him. The woman has a pensive look on her face while the man looks up at her with puppy-dog eyes.

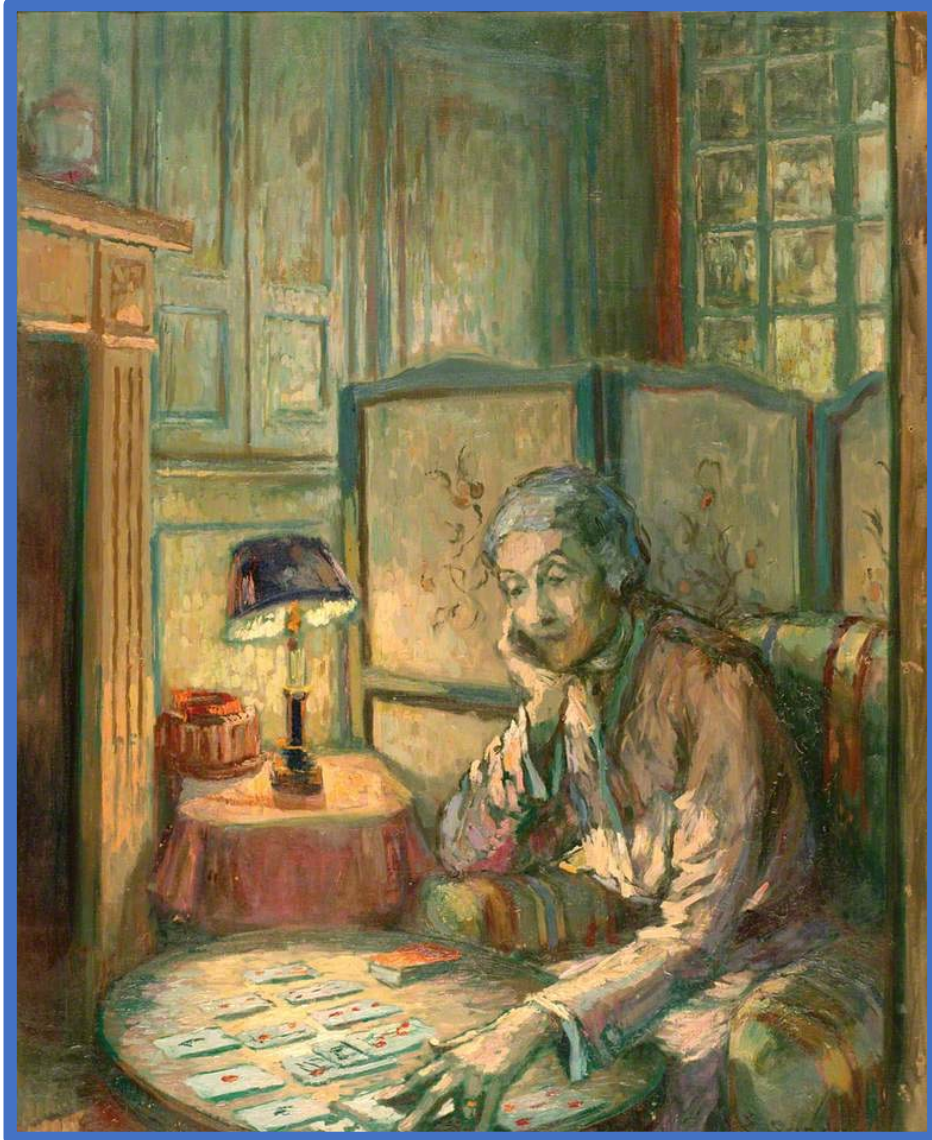
Over to you

Intimate and sexual relationships, including sexual health: that there are a range of strategies for identifying and managing sexual pressure

Ask students what they think is happening in this painting before giving them the name of the painting. Once they know the name, does that change how they see the figures in the painting?

- Who is doing the “Pleading”?
- Do they think the woman is keen to begin a relationship with the man? The name “Pleading” suggests that she has already said “No”, and he is attempting to change her mind.
- How could she resist the pressure he is putting on her by pleading with her, if she has already said “No”?
- What advice would you give the man in the picture?

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Nan Hudson Playing Patience at Auppegard, France by Ethel Sands, 1920s

© Guildhall Art Gallery, City of London Corporation

Some people are gay, get over it

Ethel Sands was an American-born artist who lived in England from childhood. She studied art in Paris, where she met her life partner Anna Hope Hudson (Nan), portrayed here playing cards at their house in France. Students might think that people could only live openly with a same-sex partner quite recently. Indeed, until 1861 the punishment for a sex between two men was technically the death penalty (although it was usually pardoned). Long before the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act, 2013, some same-sex couples openly lived together, like Ethel and Nan.

Over to you

The Law: Pupils should be made aware of the relevant legal provisions when relevant topics are being taught e.g. marriage

Ask students to think about what made it possible for Ethel and Nan to be accepted by society and for others not (i.e. being wealthy, living in artistic circles, lesbian relationships were not treated the same as gay relationships between two men, it could be hidden as two 'friends' living together etc...). Discuss how important the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act, 2013, was in promoting equality.