

## Conspicuous Consumption & Victorian Education

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### Thorstein Veblen on education:

“It is noticeable that the humanities which have so reluctantly yielded ground to the sciences are pretty uniformly adapted to shape the character of the student in accordance with a traditional self-centered scheme of consumption; a scheme of contemplation and enjoyment of the true, the beautiful, and the good, according to a conventional standard of propriety and excellence, the salient feature of which is leisure – *otium cum dignitate*.”

“The enjoyment and the bent derived from habitual contemplation of the life, ideals, speculations, and methods of consuming time and goods, in vogue among the leisure class of classical antiquity, for instance, is felt to be ‘higher,’ ‘nobler,’ ‘worthier,’ than what results in these respects from a like familiarity with the everyday life and knowledge and aspirations of commonplace humanity in a modern community.”

### Contemporary comments on education:

“...the best means of benefiting the community is to place within its reach the ladders upon which the aspiring can rise – free libraries, parks, and means of recreation, by which men are helped in body and mind; works of art, certain to give pleasure and improve the general condition of the people...in the forms best calculated to do them lasting good.”

~ Andrew Carnegie’s *Gospel of Wealth*, 1889

“‘It is three months since we asked the landlord to fix it,’ says the oldest son, a very intelligent lad who has learned English in the evening school. His father has not had that advantage, and has sat at his bench, deaf and dumb to the world about him except his own, for six years.”

~ Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 1890  
Chapter XII on The Bohemians

“Let us help the Negro by every means possible to acquire such an education in farming, dairying, stock-raising, horticulture, etc., as will place him near the top in these industries, and the race problem will in a large part be settled, or at least stripped of many of its most perplexing elements.... If this generation will lay the material foundation, it will be the quickest and surest way for enabling later generations to succeed in the cultivation of the fine arts, and to surround themselves with some of the luxuries of life, if desired.”

~ Booker T. Washington, “The Case of the Negro,” 1899

“We remarked on a recent occasion that it would do good to the educated people of this country, desirous of rendering some public service, to study carefully the great movements that are initiated in different parts of the British Empire. It is our peculiar good fortune that by the English education that we have received we have the means of acquainting ourselves with these movements.”

~ “Higher Education of Indian Women - A Suggestion,” *The Hindu*, 1891

### Illustrations of Female Students in the *Glasgow University Magazine* in 1891:



Although it is difficult to read the book titles in these copies, the ideal student on the left is studying Music and the unattractive, over-educated student on the right is studying Aristotle, Plato, and Sophocles.

### Film & Television Clips:

“An Ideal Husband” (1999) – Originally staged in London by Oscar Wilde in 1895.

“North & South” (1985) – Episode 1 – Based on a 1822 novel by John Jakes.

“Jane Eyre” (2006) – Originally published by Charlotte Brontë in 1847.

“Little House on the Prairie” (1978) – Season 5 Episode 2, “As Long As We’re Together: Part 2” – Based on the series of books written by Laura Ingalls Wilder.