

*Did eighteenth-century women migrate to towns mainly because of the attractions of the towns, or mainly to escape from life in the countryside? Discuss in the light of Joyce Ellis's article.*

In eighteenth-century society, women of the higher ranks were generally seen as 'embodiments of their husbands' and fathers' status'. This role placed tight restrictions on what they could do and whom they could meet. They were expected to appear fragile and innocent, yet highly civilized. This involved having 'accomplishments', such as the ability to embroider, play the piano and sing, which they were taught at boarding schools or by private tutors. And 'propriety' demanded that they mixed only with people of a similar social status.

However, life in the country gave these women little opportunity to fulfil this conventional role. The homes of the upper ranks of society were scattered across the countryside. 'Suitable' transport was often unavailable, and in bad weather it was either impossible or dangerous to travel on the unpaved, unlit country roads. Consequently, they could only occasionally mix socially. Meanwhile, they could no longer take part in the management of the household and country estate as increasing wealth resulted in those roles being carried out by servants and professionals. Nor could they engage in the rural pursuits enjoyed by their menfolk – riding, hunting and fishing. So these highly trained and sophisticated women were often left with unfulfilling, boring lives – passing their time in and around the home sewing, reading, writing letters and taking short walks – unable to display their accomplishments, or keep themselves usefully active, or find much amusement.

By contrast, in an urban environment many people of similar rank lived in a much smaller area. There was a variety of social venues, and good transport and street lighting, so that women could mix in 'respectable' society frequently and in safety. Indeed, some created an active role for themselves as planners and organizers of events such as balls, race meetings, plays and concerts. At these and other social gatherings they had plenty of scope for displaying themselves and their accomplishments, while also enjoying the amusements of shopping and taking tea with companions, and amenities such as circulating libraries. During the century, the female population of England's larger towns expanded dramatically.

This migration was presented by satirists of the day as evidence of women's improper desire for 'freedom from male control' (as well as their 'natural' frivolousness). However, Ellis believes this to have been far from the case. It was, she argues, a society in which women's lives were largely defined by their relationships and duties to their menfolk, whether in the country or the town. But town life, at least, offered these women some satisfaction, in enabling them to play out their essentially 'decorative' role to good effect. In the countryside that role was for the most part an empty one.

So, in flocking to the towns, high-ranking women of the eighteenth century were neither mainly attracted by the pleasures of the towns nor trying to escape from the boredom of life in the countryside. Mainly, they were seeking to fulfil their conventional role as fully as possible.