

# *The Victorian Wedding*

The wedding day was the most important event in a Victorian girl's life. It is the day her mother has prepared her for from the moment she was born. The Victorian girl knew no other ambition. She would marry, and she would marry well.

## **Naming the Day**

The wedding itself and the events leading up to the ceremony are steeped in ancient traditions still evident in Victorian customs. One of the first to influence a young girl is choosing the month and day of her wedding. June has always been the most popular month, for it is named after Juno, Roman goddess of marriage. She would bring prosperity and happiness to all who wed in her month. Practicality played a part in this logic also. If married in June, the bride was likely to birth her first child in Spring, allowing her enough time to recover before the fall harvest.

June also signified the end of Lent and arrival of warmer weather. That meant it was time to remove winter clothing and partake in one's annual bath. April, November and December were favored also, so as not to conflict with peak farm work months. October was a lucky month, signifying a bountiful harvest. May, however, was considered unlucky. "Marry in May and rue the day," an old proverb went. But "Marry in September's shine, your living will be rich and fine."

In the Southern United States, April was favored, as it was cooler and a bride's favorite flowers were in bloom—jasmine and camellia.

Brides were just as superstitious about the days of the week. A popular rhyme goes:

*Marry on Monday for health,  
Tuesday for wealth,  
Wednesday the best day of all,  
Thursday for crosses,  
Friday for losses, and  
Saturday for no luck at all.*

The Sabbath day (Sunday) was out of the question.

## **The Wedding Apparel**

Once the bride chose her wedding date she could begin planning her apparel, the most important item of which was her wedding dress. Brides have not always worn white for the marriage ceremony. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, for example, girls in their teens married in pale green, a sign of fertility. A mature girl in her twenties wore a brown dress, and older women even wore black. From early Saxon times to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, only poorer brides came to their wedding dressed in white—a public statement that she brought nothing with her to the marriage. Other brides wore their Sunday best.

Color of the gown was thought to influence one's future life:

*White—chosen right  
Blue—love will be true  
Yellow—ashamed of her fellow  
Red—wish herself dead  
Black—wish herself back  
Grey—travel far away*

*Pink—of you he'll always think  
Green—ashamed to be seen*

Ever since Queen Victoria wed in 1840, however, white has remained the traditional color for wedding gowns and bouquets. A woman then used her dress for Court Presentation after marriage, usually with a different bodice.

The early Victorian wedding dress had a fitted bodice, small waist, and full skirt (over hoops and petticoats.) It was made of organdy, tulle, lace, gauze, silk, linen or cashmere. The veil was a fine gauze, sheer cotton or lace. The reasonable cost of a wedding gown in 1850 was \$500 with \$125 for a veil. By 1861, more elaborate gowns cost as much as \$1500 if constructed with lace.

Formal weddings during this period were all white, including the bridesmaid's dresses and veils. Veils were attached to a coronet of flowers, usually orange blossoms for the bride and roses or other in-season flowers for the attendants. The bride's accessories included: short white gloves, hanky embroidered with her maiden name initials, silk stockings embroidered up the front, and flat shoes decorated with bows or ribbons at the instep.

The American frontier bride of the 1850s and 60s usually chose cambric, wool or linen dresses in a variety of colors. Few wore white, as the dress was used later for special events and church. Many had a warm, colorful shawl in paisley or plaid, which draped her shoulders at the wedding. The shawl was then used for christenings, social events and as an extra blanket in the winter. A warm shawl was more cherished than a wedding dress.

For the mid-Victorian bride (1870s), there was an emergence of middle class wealth and with it a display of their new riches. Wedding gowns fashioned by Worth in Paris were the ultimate status symbol. Moreover, if one couldn't afford an original, one copied them. Full court trains were now part of the wedding ensemble, as were long veils, a bustle, elegant details and two bodices—a modest one for the wedding and a low one for special occasions.

The late Victorians (1890s) saw the bustle disappear, a demi-train and large sleeves now in fashion. If the bride married in church, the dress must have a train, with a veil of the same length. The veil could be lace or silk tulle. From the mid-Victorian era to the 1890s, the veil covered the bride's face and was not lifted until after church. The veil was not used as a shawl after the wedding any more, however. White kid gloves were long enough to tuck under the sleeves, and had a slit in one finger to slip the ring on without removing the glove. Slippers were of white kid, satin or brocade and the heels rose to one inch.

### **The Groom's Apparel**

The grooms, too, were concerned with fashion on their wedding day, and turned to magazines for advice on how best to be turned out. In the early Victorian era, the bridegroom wore a frock coat of blue, mulberry or claret, and a flower favor in his lapel. By 1865, men's coats were tailored with a special "flower-hole" for this purpose. His waistcoat was white, and his trousers of lavender doeskin. Black was out of the question. The best man and groomsmen wore frock coats also, but in a more subdued tone. The American frontier groom wore a flower on the lapel of his best suit, using whatever was in the bride's bouquet.

By the mid-Victorian era, frock coats were seldom worn, the morning coat being preferable because of its smarter appearance. Some grooms still wore frock coats, however, and did so with a vest of black cloth, dark gray trousers, a folded cravat of

medium color, and lavender gloves stitched in black.

Fashions changed rapidly in the late Victorian years, from no need for gloves in 1885, to a must for gloves in 1886. By now, however, men wore pearl colored gloves with black embroidery. By 1899, the frock coat was black in style along with a double-breasted, light-colored waistcoat, dark tie, gray striped cashmere trousers, patent-leather button boots and pale tan kid gloves. Throughout the Victorian era, a black top hat was a necessity.

### **The Ceremony**

Before the 1880s, a couple was required by law to have a morning ceremony. By the late 1880s, permissible hours were extended until 3:00 p.m. In the Eastern United States, the fashionable hours were between 10:00 a.m. and Noon because it was an English custom. In New York in 1890, half after three was also a fashionable hour. Southern American weddings, however, were usually at 6:00 p.m. because it was cooler then.

The marriage ceremony took place at home or in church, with either many guests or a few. In the 1850s, weddings were usually held in church, and it was customary to use the bride's church. The wedding ring was usually a plain gold band with the initials of the couple and the date of their wedding engraved inside. There were few double ring ceremonies in the Victorian era. It was considered good luck for the ring to drop during the ceremony, thus all evil spirits were shaken out.

After the ceremony, the bride and groom walked out without looking left or right. It was considered bad taste to acknowledge friends and acquaintances. The bride's parents were the first to leave the church, and the best man the last after he paid the minister or clergyman for his services. From a custom dating back to the Roman times when nuts were thrown after the departing couple, the practice continued, but in the form of rice, grain or birdseed, a symbol of fertility.

### **The Reception**

Because of the early hour for weddings, the reception was traditionally a breakfast. It was an English custom to have a Noon ceremony with the breakfast thirty minutes later at the bride's home. There, the couple received the guests and accepted congratulations. In the Eastern United States, they emulated the English in their ceremonies. In the West, they mimicked the East, especially New York and Boston Society.

\*All of the preceding material was written by Michelle Hoppe Prima. Her website is worth a visit at: <http://www.literary-liaisons.com/>