

Teaching American History Grant: Learning 2007-2008
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Topic Title: The Cult of True Womanhood

Grade Level: 11th

Overview of the Learning Experience:

- Students will be able to comprehend how the role of middle-class women within the family was changed by the Industrial Revolution.
- Students will be able to explain the four cardinal virtues of a True Women and explain how these virtues defined a women's place in good society.
- This lesson aligns with New York State Social Studies Learning Standards
- This lesson will be formally assessed by an end product where students will be able to with 80% accuracy create a chart that will list the virtues of True Womanhood, their reasons behind each virtue, and finally, two or three real-world results of these reasons on middle class women.

Essential Questions:

What is the role of women in society?

Time Allotment: 1 class period of discussion, followed by a take home assignment, which would be reviewed for 1/3 of the subsequent class.

Vocabulary: Students will need to be familiar with the following terms:

Piety-dutifulness in religion: devoutness

Purity- being pure, free from moral fault or guilt

Submissiveness- the condition of being humble or compliant, particularly to a women's husband or father

Domesticity- relating to the home or family

Intellectual Pursuits- education or critical thinking

Irreligion- not religious or having lost religious values

Innocence- as in ignorance is bliss, lack of worldly experience of sophistication

Materials/Resources:

Students will need:

A copy of an excerpt from Chapter II of Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Women's Home* (New York: J. B. Ford & Co., 1869) , 23-24, A Christian House.

Excerpt form Freedom's Journal, from Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1984), 108-09.

Teachers can also provide a graph, to be given to the students for their take home assignment.

Procedure: This lesson is designed as a modified direct instructional lesson. Teacher is to ask questions, leading students on a path that will end up explaining the Cult of True Womanhood.

- Begin by asking students to list various jobs available in America just after the Erie Canal was completed in 1825. After a list is compiled ask where are the women? Are they doing these jobs, and if not where are they?
- Students should be able to link women as slave labor, living as farmers, on the frontier, as shopkeepers, innkeepers, factory workers, in Lowell MA. But there should be jobs for which no women can be found. These are the “lost” women, they exist but do not have wage paying jobs.
- The “lost” women on the list, those women for whom there are no jobs, what do they have in common? Create another list as a class. Look at race, class, geography, urban vs. rural, and anything else that seems relevant.
- This should lead the students to realize these women are mainly white, upper class or middle class, the wives of lawyers, office workers, factory managers, merchants, teachers and physicians among others. They are mostly urban, located in towns (remind students that a town is anyplace with over 2,500 people), and located predominately in the East and growing Midwest. The southern belle doesn’t quite fit in but can be included.
- Are these women economically necessary for their families to maintain their current economic conditions? Do they have to work? What household chores are required of them? Remind students of the change in the marketplace that replace homespun with ready-made clothes. What role is left for them to do? Raising the children and taking care of the family.
- This is where the Cult of True Womanhood comes in, and also where direct instruction takes over. The idea of a True Woman is put forth in Women’s magazine, gift annuals, advice books and religious literature of the 19th century. A true woman had a role to play while at home- to provide a safe place away from the rough and tumble of the marketplace that is American society. Furthermore the Cult of True Womanhood says that women are predisposed to fulfill this role.
- There are 4 cardinal virtues women possess that allow them to fill this role in society. These virtues are 1) Piety, 2) Purity, 3) Domesticity and 4) Submissiveness. Define each word, and ask students to relate what this would mean for how a true woman would act.
 - *Piety*- women have a propensity for religion. They can be the shining examples that men can follow, leading them toward God and away from the sinful world. Religion is also a way for a woman to focus a restless mind on an appropriate

- issue. Think of women as the good examples, who do no wrong and whose disappointment is chastisement enough to lead men back on the right path.
- *Purity*-This is sexual purity in both thought and deed. If a woman is not pure, she is a fallen woman, note the similarity with a fallen angel. In the literature of the time, death is the only appropriate end to a fallen woman and her child. This is the time when language changes to become pure. Breast meat becomes white meat, table legs are referred to as table limbs, and women have “stomach problems” when referring to any ailment of the body between their head and their limbs. Why? Purity in thought as well as deed is necessary for a true woman. Also in the literature of the time unwed mothers are punished by God for their sin by losing their baby and going mad.
 - *Domesticity*- A woman’s place was the home, this meant the creation of a place where the husband would want to retreat to, after a day at work. The home was to be free of all stress, a peaceful oasis for the husband. A woman’s job, was to create this place. She was to use her piety and purity to achieve this place. The home was to be a stable, peaceful place, the opposite of the work place. Work was the domain of the male, the female domain, home, was to be a leisurely place also. This peaceful place would attract men, her husband, away from the evils of the outer world.
 - *Submissiveness*- Women are the weaker sex, and require a protector. They should obey this protector, even when he is wrong. Since women are physically smaller and keep fainting (mainly because the clothes they wear constrict their lungs and the weight of the clothing is very heavy, not mention the lack of exercise the average woman got) they were viewed as passive bystanders. This physical weakness was also seen in brain size, being smaller, meaning women would be unable to perform any intellectual pursuits. Most importantly, since women are passive bystanders and can’t think, they must learn to accept the faults and mistakes of their husbands silently. As one book *Letters to Mothers* (Hartford 1838), puts it “Do not expect too much”.
- Once the students have gotten the hooks into these ideas, hand out the chart, and have the students fill out the Piety section. The second section should explain what Piety is, and the third column explains 2 or 3 specific things a True Woman would do, to show their Piety.

Homework: complete the chart for Purity, Domesticity and Submissiveness.

Summary: The next day have students orally answer the following questions: How do these documents define the role of women in society? What were the four cardinal virtues of a true woman? Who could be a true woman? What were those women who did not measure up to True Womanhood?

The American Woman's Home

Introduction

The authors of this volume, which they sympathize with every honest effort to relieve the disabilities and suffering of their sex, are confident that the chief cause of these evils is the fact that the honor and duties of the family state are not duly appreciated, that women are not trained for these duties as men are trained for their trades and professions, and that, as the consequence, the family labor is poorly done, poorly paid, and regarded menial and disgraceful.

To be the nurse of young children, a cook, or a housemaid, is regarded as the lowest and last resort of poverty, and one which no woman of culture and position can assume without loss of caste and respectability.

It is the aim of this volume to elevate both the honor and the remuneration of all the employments that sustain the many difficult and sacred duties of the family state, and thus to render each department of woman's true profession as much desired and respected as are the most honored professions of men...

Source: Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home* (New York: J.B. Ford & Co., 1869), 13.

Excerpt from Freedom's Journal

Early black newspapers published articles on what was called the “woman’s sphere.” The following is advice in a leading African American newspaper, Freedom’s Journal.

Women are not formed for great cares themselves, but to soften ours. Their tenderness is the proper reward for the dangers we undergo for their preservation. They are confined within the narrow limits of domestic assiduity, and when they stray beyond them, they move out of their proper sphere and consequently without grace.

Employ yourself in household affairs. Wait till your husband confides to you, and do not give your advice till he asks it. Always appear flattered by the little he does for you. Never wound his vanity: not even in the most trifling instance. A wife may have more sense than her husband but she should never seem to know it.