

American studies



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American Studies Consider the definitions of womanhood and describe what it means to be an urban immigrant woman living in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century.

The predominantly peasant European immigrants that came to the U. S. at the turn of the twentieth century were one of the most poverty-stricken immigrant groups that ever entered the U. S. After arriving at Ellis Island or to the port at Baltimore, many Eastern Europeans stayed in cities to work in dangerous industrial jobs. Few were able to ever move far from the city in which they first arrived or onward from the low-skilled manual labor jobs they secured upon arrival. The nineteenth-century immigrant man worked long hours in a materialistic society and their wives were hostages in the home, unaffected by self-interest thus creating a perfect world in which men were free to pursue every material pursuit they wished while women were constrained to remain at home and protect the moral and ethical values of the family unit. Submission became a defining aspect of the urban, immigrant woman first as daughter then later as wife and mother. She was taught that if she chose to think for herself or espouse her own opinions, she would lose both her happiness and respect of others. The immigrant woman living in urban areas began taking advantage of the abundant job opportunities and enjoyed a measure of individuality and autonomy those previous generations of women in America had seldom experienced. The individuality and power of these women marked a shift away from communal domesticity, undermining the Victorian culture that had existed prior to the mass immigration of that era, with a new emphasis upon autonomy, pleasure, and consumption. Between 1900 and World War I the old Victorian code which prescribed the subjugation of women crumbled. The feminist

movement that has served to lift women to a greater level of equality today was greatly aided by these immigrant women who broke the mold by working outside the home.

It is often stated that immigration and emerging capitalism in the United States must be seen as interconnected.

Immigrants to the U. S. leave the familiar surrounding of their country of origin, the homeland of their ancestors, to travel great distances then struggle to assimilate into a new culture and learn a new language. They are strongly motivated to embark on this life-altering journey into the unknown because they are impoverished with little hope of improving their situation within their home country. That the U. S. is a prosperous nation, that its people enjoy high standards of living is not and has not been a secret. The tired, poor and huddled masses that immigrated to the U. S. at the turn of the twentieth century had heard of ‘ streets paved with gold.’ In most cases, if the streets were paved at all, this would be an improvement from the despairing conditions the homeless and wretched refuse were suffering in their home country. Immigrants have flocked to the U. S. for the promise of prosperity during the entirety of American history. This can be best evidenced by examining the period of 1890 to 1920 when the U. S. experienced its largest single surge of immigration. In this 30 year period, more than 25 million people came to America, mostly coming from Europe but a majority of this wave consisted of people from the Southern and Eastern regions of the continent such as Italy and Poland. This mass influx of immigrants was needed and welcomed. The Industrial Revolution was in full swing during this time, society was completing its transformation from farm to city life and urban manpower was in short supply. The immigrants had

jobs and could build their new life. The American economy benefited because this endless source of labor streaming into Ellis Island made it the most industrialized and economically successful country in the world. Though the jobs were hard and the pay very low, the conditions were better than what they were in Eastern Europe. Many were motivated by a desire to make money in the U. S. then return to their homeland and enjoy a higher standard of living there. For most, however, this dream never materialized.