

Gender identity during the gold rush essay



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Over the course of America's history, the gender role for men and women has evolved. Since the beginning of time, men have played the dominant role in nearly every culture around the world, including the United States. The men during the seventeenth century were dominant figures who earned money to take care of themselves and their families. Women on the other hand, were the ones who were in the home taking care of the children, cooking, and cleaning. When the Gold Rush occurred in 1849, not only was society changing, but the roles of both men and women were rapidly changing as well. The effects of gender role determined the way that society was running.

When this sudden change of gender role started to change, society started to run much differently. Traditional gender roles are beneficial to society. They benefited society in many ways including keeping stability, order and just making life easier in general. Brian Roberts book *American Alchemy: The California Gold Rush and Middle-Class Culture* looks at how the gender role for men and women were evolving during this time, including women taking over the role of men back in the homestead and how the lives of the miners in California were. When many people think of the men who were the forty-niners, many people seem to think of unmarried men who were unattached, who were rebellious, poor, and had a working class identity in society. That stereotype however, is completely untrue.

Many of the miners were far from being poor. In fact, they had to have some money in order to make the journey from the East coast all the way to California. At this time, the cost of getting there was more than a year's pay for the average man.

In addition, most of the miners were not single young men. In fact, most of the miners were married and were usually connected to their families and communities back in the East. Furthermore, nearly all of them were brought up and lived on the moral codes and values which was going around in the East coast. Many of the men who later became miners, were from well connected middle class families, had white-collar skilled occupations and had strong economic ties. The reason many of the men left for California was because of everything that they had heard about the gold rush. All of them believed that they would be panning for large chunks of gold which would make them rich overnight. During this time, many people believed that gold seeking was not an activity which was for respectable men.

In addition, they believed that California was not a place for those who were refined. Even before many of these miners went to California, people saw California as a place of vulgar men, immodest women, and immoral behavior. During this time, society was extremely conservative.

Men were required to work at a decent and respected middle class job and be the breadwinner in the house. By the time of the gold rush, these miners appeared to be “ providing models of behavior that were decidedly unethical, possibly immoral, and certainly hostile to family harmony” (Roberts, pg. 47). Around this time, the market revolution began and the middle class Americans welcomed it with oversimplification.

For this reason, many new middle-class followers wanted a last chance to resurrect the idea of a wider and more closely interconnected family. The home and family life provided a point of resistance to social and moral

fragmentation. The home which was dominated by women, which was completely separate from the market, was not a good place for young men to understand the “ battle strategies of the marketplace” (Roberts, pg. 48). For many people, the transition from the home to the business world was one of the most difficult experiences they would have to go through.

The tension between the “ home and the outside world of business was everywhere apparent in mid-nineteenth-century American bourgeois culture” (Roberts, pg. 49). Miners who were raised by their mothers to be good sons in the house, educated in polite conversations and table manners experienced a sense of loss when they were faced with a rougher culture on the streets. By the time the gold rush rolled around, there was an emerging pattern of reaction against the moral strictures of polite culture and a disdain for the daily white collar office work. Although there were several gold rushes, including one in the south, the one thing which makes the California gold rush stand out from the other is the large amount of writing which was produced by not only the California gold seekers but their wives and family members they left back on the east coast. For many of the men who dreamed of going to California, a lot of the literature pieces around this time offered a way out of the “ impasse between respectability and the marketplace” (Roberts, pg. 52).

The writings had major effects on the American middle class and people were learning important lessons. Several of the lessons from these writings is that “ polite culture had its limitations, and nature, or the West, was a utopian space in which one could escape the stiffness of bourgeois respectability” (Roberts, pg. 60). What this means is that by the 1840’s

many of the men believed that their bodies were becoming softer due to the acquisition of table manners and parlor etiquette. The marketplace was becoming harsher and it required strength, not manners.

The average miner had a family, a mother, a sister, a wife, or a mistress that he wrote to while he was in California. The letters exchanged between the men on the West and the women in the East would negotiate the meanings of the event. Men who had families had to negotiate their departures and these said negotiations were troubled with difficulties. Many women saw the enticement of easy wealth and the male experience embedded within the imagined gold rush as a threat as opposed to an opportunity. The idea of an adventure to California, and life in the gold fields, was filled with too much risk and elements of irresponsibility to be supported in the dynamics of the family life. Many women saw the gold rush as a way for their husbands to escape from the day to day life and responsibility of raising and taking care of a family.

The long distance across the country coupled with the fact that the only idea that the forty-niners had of the route was that it was extremely costly and dangerous meant that a majority of their wives could not expect to go along with their husbands. Many of the women whose husbands left for California wrote about how they too envisioned wealth and independence as factors of being a middle class citizen. Due to mid-nineteenth-century ideologies, women had to negotiate the terms of their partnerships carefully. It hides the negotiations and obscuring certain possibilities - such as the idea that women might actually go along with their husbands - while at the same time revealing others.

The domestic virtues of piety, purity, and submissiveness allowed the wives to recognize the boundaries between male and female interests and identity. In the home, women had the companionship of other women whose husbands also went to search for gold, and they received a sense of independent self-worth, a measure of power over domestic affairs, and an idea of the juncture between these affairs and the outside world of business activity. When many of the husbands left to go West, the wives would take over the husband's business. This gave them a sense of independence and self-worth. Women were starting to enter the marketplace and business world. In fact, many of them were exceeding.

Some women had more power than other, and some, had more of a certain type of power than their husbands. The idea of gender was quickly changing along with society. Women were now seen while men were unseen; wives were at work while their husbands were off doing very little but complaining. What was even stranger was that many husbands were starting to recognize that the gender relations and gender roles had turned around completely. However, these were not new responsibilities for the women. Maintaining the home had never separated most of these women from regular engagement with business, credit, or cash exchange.

The only thing which was new to them was the admission that they could do it alone without their husbands around. For men, independence was measured by one's powers as a provider. The more people that depended upon the male head-of-household, the more independent and masculine he became. The male idea of independence required female dependency. If he were to ask for any type of help, his independence was shaky. Because there

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was little to do on the western front, many of the miners kept busy by writing letters to their loved ones back home or in diaries and journals. What made the gold rush interesting for the men is that the exposition of forbidden behaviors, its challenge to proper standards of self-control through constantly repeated acts of gambling, prostitution, and sometimes violent ways of self-expression. What the men had learned on the East coast was completely diminished once they had arrived in California.

The gold rush was hard on a majority of the men who were there. Coming into California, many of the men believed that they were going to be able to strike gold over night and become wealthy. This however, was not the case. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Some of the men went broke and even had to ask their wives back home on the East coast to send them money. Other men, packed up and moved back home.

Many men wrote back home to their wives and talked about how California was much more different than they had imagined, and even more different than how it was back at home. The gold rush had caused gender roles and gender identities to change rapidly. Previously, women were confined to the home with the children. When the men had to leave for California they left their wives and family members in difficult positions.

Women were suddenly thrown into a man's world by running businesses and men were the ones suffering and alone on the western front. The gold rush started a small revolution which allowed women to break away from the stereotypes of being at home and they soon became independent. For the

men however, it was not a liberating experience seeing as though many of them had bad luck while on the search for gold.