

# Cameron c. may

Sociology, Women



Cameron C. May History 130 Chapter 4: Pedestal, Loom, and Auction Block, 1800—1860 Visual Sources Essay: Godey's Lady's Book (pages 232—239). Question for Analysis: Look at the profiles of the true women from Godey's. Notice their tiny waists, the composure of their hands, the elegance of their bearing. How do these and other details reinforce the message that women are unfit for the public sphere? The women pictured in Godey's Lady's Book show an ideal to which women aspired but in truth could not often obtain outside of the middle to upper classes. The images portrayed in this magazine represented the concept of "true womanhood"; women who were regarded as pious and domestic. They were to be the anchors of the home and the educator to children. The images displayed are of the ultimate wife and mother which were an iconic representation of the values of those who read Godey's. The women depicted in the book looked fragile, innocent and demure. They were not fit for work in the public sphere physically as women were supposed to be frail, delicate creatures. Women were also not fit mentally or emotionally for the public sphere. They were too innocent and pure for the dangers of such pursuits as suffrage or politics. Figure 4. 1, The Constant, is the image of the perfect wife. A woman is shown watching over her sleeping child as her husband is entering the room. Her stance is protective of her young infant, while at the same time showing she is subordinate to her husband. Images such as these in Godey's illustrated to women the balance between wife and mother to which they should strive. The "true" woman is an anchor for her husband. She keeps the home, tends to the children and steadfastly loves her husband to encourage him from wandering astray (p. 233). The Constant shows the husband doting on his

wife, leaning over her in a loving manner suggesting her patience and love have kept him in line. This idea of women providing emotional and spiritual stability (p. 232) was something the magazine's editor, Josepha Hale, strongly defended. She felt this path for women was of the upmost importance to the nation. She is quoted as saying, " The elevation of the [female] sex will not consist in becoming like man, in doing man's work, or striving for the dominion of the world. The true woman...has a higher and holier vocation. She works in the elements of human nature. " In considering the " higher and holier" position of woman, Figure 4. 2 of The Christian Mother is the picture worth a thousand words. The mother in this painting is clearly a reference to Mary the mother of Christ. She is dressed in robes similar to those in which the Holy Mother is often depicted. She appears at peace and is lifting her eyes towards Heaven. In her arms is a young boy whose face is portrayed as the Christ child's often is; serene, calm and possessing wisdom beyond his young age. This speaks to the idea that women were to be pious and virtuous; also that she passes these attributes onto her children. One of the most important and natural jobs a woman had was to be a teacher. She was expected to be selfless in the education of her children so they could grow to be good, active citizens. This particular depiction of a Madonna-like mother also brought the previously off-limits image of Mary to the growing Protestant middle class (p. 234). Another image showcasing the piety of women is Figure 4. 4, Purity. In this picture we see two young women dressed in lovely gowns, seemingly at a church. One is reading from the Bible and the other stands in quiet contemplation. In reading the information with the picture, it is revealed the lovely gowns

shown are actually the latest in wedding dress fashion. This painting suggests these are the women that would become perfect wives. They appear to conform to what historian Barbara Welter identified as the four basic elements of true womanhood; domesticity, piety, submission and purity (p. 236). These women are not outside the home working or engaging in unseemly social interactions with those of the opposite sex. They are in church, practicing their piety and also displaying their purity with the virginal white dresses being worn. The ideal was women were to hold up the standards of true womanhood while waiting for a husband on which to dote and children to educate. Of course, the idea of true womanhood seemed to be an ideal for those women of middle to upper class status. Figure 4. 5, *Cooks*, is a glaring illustration of the juxtaposition between wife and domestic help. The mistress in the painting is pretty, well groomed and obviously frustrated. The source of her frustration is likely the homely cook that has just dropped a tray of something that may have been part of a meal onto the floor. The way the cook has been drawn automatically suggests to the viewer a person of lower class status. She is not attractive and appears to be dim-witted. She is also being portrayed, via her clothing, to be a less than pure or pious woman. In comparison, the mistress of the house is shown in finer clothing, well kempt, and thin. The cut of her clothing is more modest and displays less skin. The husband pictured seems aghast at the entire situation. He appears to be looking down at the cook, disgusted by her inappropriate clothing and her lack of grace. He seems caught between a protective stance to shield his wife and being ready to run from the horror taking place in the kitchen. The truth illustrated in this painting, however, is

that lower class women struggled with the attainment of true womanhood. For them, it was often completely impractical. Women should be domestic creatures, tending to the home. The cook in this picture is working outside of her own home. Her husband may not be making enough money to support the family, she may be widowed or perhaps she was never considered for marriage. No matter the reason, she needs the income offered by this wealthier household, yet she is being stigmatized for that need. The irony of this, too, is the engraved plates used to print pictures such as Cook were created and hand colored by a stand of female wage laborers (p. 232). The images from Godey's Lady's Book were specifically designed to promote the feminine ideal of selflessness, purity and subtle maternal influence (p. 232), as well as provide an iconic image of true womanhood. The country was in the midst of industrial and economic revolution. The divide between the classes grew larger than it had ever been. Godey's was an attempt to preserve the memories of the American Revolution while at the same time securing that legacy within a stable, peaceful and permanent nation (p. 233). In relation to history, there are some facts that can be gleaned from this magazine. It is a representation of an ideal to which many women aspired. The idea of true womanhood is represented within those pages. I feel, however, Godey's should also be viewed as propaganda and perpetuation of stereotypes. The magazine was not published strictly to help women achieve the goal of true womanhood, but also to showcase the latest fashion trends. Along with fashion suggestions, the magazine provided stories reinforcing the stereotype of submissive, domestic and pious wives. The pictures from Godey's showed delicate, fragile women who were physically unfit for the

public sphere. Men were much stronger and robust, therefore much more suited to the public sphere. The female sex is shown as pious, pure, innocent and demure. The nation was sailing some rough seas and there needed to be an anchor in this storm. That anchor was the true woman.