

Womanhood: factory and republican motherhood essay sample



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Since the independence of America from the British, the ideals of American womanhood have been constantly changing. Between the 1770's and the outbreak of the Civil War, women had shifted from a gender of little power to one of great importance. Over the span of the century from 1770 to 1870, the culture of the American society changed economically, socially, and into the adoption of republican motherhood and cult of domesticity. During the time of the Revolutionary War, society regarded women as the teachers of the "sons of liberty" which resulted in a higher status for women; their new importance led to the cult of domesticity in which women began taking more opportunities and a new attitude towards life (True Womanhood). Both "republican motherhood" and "cult of domesticity" would not be achieved without a struggle through the issues of race, class and sex.

In the late 18th century, women were slowly beginning to gain equality as the Revolution and Declaration of Independence spurred a movement of individual rights (Carnes 132). Because of the Revolutionary War, a majority of the men were drafted and away from home; women assumed the role of "father" and took on most responsibilities around the house (Carnes 133). In a letter from Philadelphia, 1776, a woman wrote of her sacrifice and effort to contribute to the war. Though part of the upper class, she has learned to knit, conserve, and provide for herself and the house without use of British products (Document A). Like many other women during the Revolution, this woman was fully conscious of her effort to contribute to the victory for independence (Carnes 133). At the same time, the approach on education for women changed. Society began to view women as important teachers of the next generation (Carnes 133).

Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, supported education for women as he saw it “ necessary that women be qualified to a certain degree of education in instructing their sons of liberty and government” (Document B). In the 1780’s, at least half of the white women in America were illiterate but half a century later in the 1830’s, the first women’s college was opened and the level of female literacy rose (133, 312 Carnes). The new encouragement of education and acknowledged effort of women during the war are defined as “ republican motherhood”; the new ideal of education for women allowed women to gain respect as intellectually capable and important beings in society (Republican Motherhood).

Shortly after the end of the Revolutionary War, the first factory began its production in 1790 (224 Carnes). Because machines replaced skilled labor, about 83. 3% of all occupations of women in Massachusetts, 1837 were factory employment; many women were also drawn to factories because of the offer of dormitories (Document C, 228 Carnes). Factories offered women support and the opportunity to save money for other causes (family); they also offered escape from farms into a social and exciting environment (229 Carnes). M. Edwards, a female factory worker, fully supported and embraced the boarding system in her invitation to a friend but revealed the dark sides of the factory life (Document D). Edwards discussed the horrible repetitiveness of her work and wish that “ the factory had never been thought of” (Document D). Life in the factory was extremely restricted and controlled by the supervisor (always male); the factory workers would have strict curfews and rules that would give them a feeling of entrapment and suppression (229 Carnes).

Female factory workers questioned the praised “ republican motherhood” and argued that mothers could not teach the next generation if they are “ enclosed within brick walls of a cotton mill from twelve and a half to thirteen and a half hours a day” (Document F). Factory owners and supervisors gave the women no chances to move up ranks in their society thus women were stuck in the same position for years (229 Carnes). In response to the treatment of female workers, many female activists and orators spoke out to the public. In Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, she urges women to “ grow intellectually and unfold the powers given to her” (Document E). Fuller’s message was greeted with much enthusiasm. By the start of the Civil War, many young female workers left the mills in search for better jobs as teachers and clerks (230 Carnes). Mill owners were forced to turn to immigrants while the female class in America was slowly rising towards equality (230 Carnes).

Along with many other female activists, Fuller helped establish the “ cult of domesticity” in which women follow four characteristics (piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness) to live by (*True Womanhood*). Women were beginning to demonstrate strength and power in America. But this change was not always greeted with support and motivation. To an American magazine of “ literature, science, and art,” “ women are by nature inferior to man in passion, intellect and physical strength” (Document G). The harsh criticism against women only slowed and suppressed the womanhood movement. The picture presented in Document J shows a black family being parted as the wife begs the slave owner to buy her and her baby. The male

slave is more valuable to the slave owner than the woman and their child, despite the different issues of gender in slavery.

The subject of gender was different in the world of slavery because of the widespread view of slaves at the time. Both sexes would work the fields and both male and female slaves would be treated equally (345 Carnes). But the differences between the men and women were in caretaking and relations with the master. Elderly female slaves usually raised both slave and white children while the elderly male slaves were still working on the field (345 Carnes). Despite this subtle difference, women had the same role within slave families just as white women did. Slave cabins were kept and looked after by the women who would also cook and raise the children (Carnes 345). But Document H shows a different side to the relationship between the master and female slave. A young slave girl was “violated by a man forty years her senior” because “she was his property and must be subject to his will in all things” (Document H). The power of the owner over the slaves and the advantages he took over female slaves spurred both abolitionists and women activists (348 Carnes).

By the time of the Civil War, women have risen dramatically in society. With the establishment of republican motherhood and cult of domesticity, women were able to prove themselves better, stronger, and capable. In Iowa, a farmer's wife was able to take over a man's job and proved her equality in the quality of her work and effort (Document I). The significance in the society's acknowledgement of women and their strengths would later be a key factor in the Civil War and the rest of American history.

Works Cited

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