

Maggie Sees Women — An Experiment in History

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SEPTEMBER 27, 2012 by MAGGIEFELISBERTO

Cultish True Women (and everybody else)

The early nineteenth century came with the True Woman, and she had a cult. True Womanhood was the epitome of female success: complete devotion to keeping house, child rearing and deference to a husband's will. A True Woman was apolitical, soft and demure. By no means was she a public figure, she never worked a paying job, she would not be seen at the theatre. She was religious, moral, not intellectual. A True Woman stayed in the home (even during parades).

Given these distinguishers, most nineteenth century women were not True Women. Black women were not True Women. Native American women were not True Women. Working women, whether they were mill girls or teachers or thespians, were not True Women. Single women were not True Women. Widows were not True Women. Only the upper middle class housewife could fully succeed in True Womanhood, so why did so many other women who could never fit the bill buy into this definition of womanhood?

Class distinctions and race distinctions sharply divided Jacksonian America, and the upper middle class became the ideal towards which all lower classes strove. However, instead of the class gap shrinking, it widened with the early stages of industrialism. And as the class gap widened, the sex gap widened as well. This was the era of the "separate sphere" — when men and women lived almost completely separate lives. The male sphere was in the public: church, professions, politics. The female sphere was in the home. A good woman, a *true woman* stuck to her sphere.

True Womanhood was a craze that spread like wildfire, eaten up by the masses and propagated by publications like *Godey's Lady's Book*. The widely popular magazine edited by Sarah Hale lectured women on the importance of the home and fashion. Sarah Hale, a widow and working woman who reached national fame with *Godey's Lady's Book*, throughout her career expressed a desire to be a proper housewife but was unable to do so because of her five children and deceased husband. Sarah Hale, she made herself clear, was the exception to the rule.



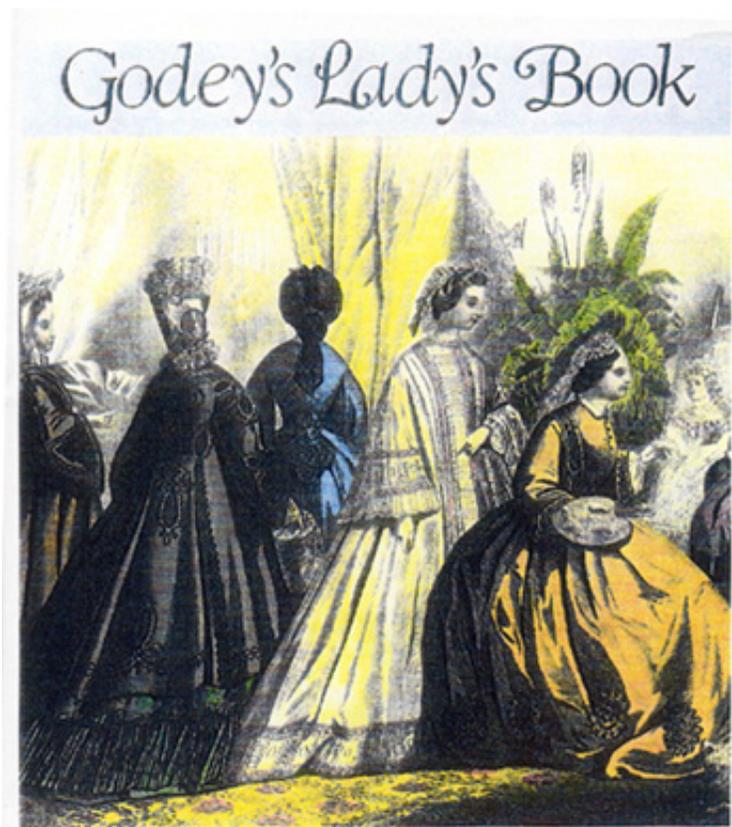
(http://maggieeeswomenshistory.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/sarah_hale_portrait.jpg)

Sarah Hale wore black every day of her life after her husband died, wrote "Mary Had a Little Lamb," and campaigned for Thanksgiving to be a national holiday.

To say *Godey's Lady's Book* was popular would be an understatement. Sarah Hale was the Helen Gurley Brown of her day, and *Godey's Lady's Book* was the *Cosmopolitan*. In 1860, the publication reached 160,000 subscribers. The magazine, complete with full color fashion plates and directions on how to make wax fruit, instructed women on how to be *women*.

The employed woman bought *Godey's Lady's Book*, as did the upper middle class housewife. The book became a cultural normalizer for separate spheres. For the upper middle class woman, the book was practical advice on how to run her home. For the lower class mill girl, the book showed glimpses of a glamorous life of ease that was unattainable and yet desired.

If True Womanhood was the desired life of the masses, then their actual lives were much different. Lower class women worked, and they worked for wages that were considerably lower than their male counterparts. Jobs available to women included exhausting factory work, exhausting teaching careers, exhausting domestic work, and the ever frowned-upon actress. Acting allowed for greater independence and a higher likelihood to a fair wage, but carried with it the social stigma of loose sexuality. Factory work, a relatively new profession, quickly became dominated by women (in 1828, nine out of ten textile workers in New England were female).



<http://maggieeeswomenshistory.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/godeysladybook.jpg>
GLB employed bunches of women (who worked from home) to color in the fashion plates.

Lower class women pursued factory jobs because they needed the money; they were hired so that men would not be wasted on such trivial work. Most working women were single, and their jobs were considered temporary situations until marriage, so naturally some mill girls found the independence of working delightful. However, the cheap labor of women became even cheaper as factories decreased pay and increased hours. Working women like Mary Paul, who started working at the Lowell mills in Massachusetts when she was sixteen, saw the devolution of working conditions first hand. At the start of her career, she gladly promoted her workplace to other women, but within a few years she complained of being overworked and underpaid.

Of course, the mill girls all read *Godey's Lady's Book*.

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