

Publishers' Bindings Online, 1815-1930: The Art of Books
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Sample Lesson Plan: Women's History
Grades 6-12

Objectives:

Students will learn that:

- 1) Women of the early to mid-19th century were judged based on the "Cult of Domesticity."
- 2) Some women rejected this notion and fought for women's rights and equality.
- 3) Bookbindings of the 19th and early 20th centuries reflect both trends.

Materials:

- 1) A computer with an Internet connection and a large screen or other capability to display the teacher's actions to the entire class.
- 2) A chalk board or dry-erase board and appropriate writing implement.
- 3) **For grades 9-12 only:** Several computer stations with Internet connection where students can work either individually or in small groups. *Alternatively, the exercise could be conducted as an out-of-class assignment.*

Lesson

In today's society, women vote and commonly run for political office. They frequently work outside the home, and many women even choose not to have children in order to pursue careers. Although this seems normal to us now, there was a time when all of these behaviors were considered outrageous, and even illegal.

For many decades in the 19th century, women were judged according to a "Cult of Domesticity," which was created and perpetuated by the media. By the end of the Civil War, women had begun to fight for their rights and equal place in society. Book bindings of the 19th and early 20th century reflect both the way women were supposed to behave according to the rules of the cult, and the way they wanted to be considered.

Cult of Domesticity

Evidence from a variety of printed sources reveals that for many decades of the 19th century, beginning around 1820, Americans held stereotypical notions about men's and women's roles in society. Historians call this phenomenon the "Cult of Domesticity," or the "Cult of True Womanhood."

The period between 1820 and the start of the Civil War saw the growth of the middle class in America. Increasingly, men would go off to work while women and children stayed home. Popular culture of the time—including women's magazines, advice books,

newspapers, and fiction—emphasized the division between women and men. The ideal of womanhood that came about featured four characteristics of true womanhood, all of which are evident in book bindings:

- 1) [Go to “Guided Search” on the PBO site, and type “pbw00794” in the first search box. Click “search.” Click on the thumbnail that appears, and then enlarge the image by clicking on the largest box below it.] *Piety*. A true woman would be deeply religious. In addition to serving as the spiritual leader of her family, taking them to church and reading the Bible to them, a true woman would consider herself a soldier in Christ’s army against lechery and sin. Many women thus were involved in the Moral Reform movement of the 1830s and 1840s, promoting abstinence. This German-American book shows a woman reading the Bible.
- 2) [In “Guided Search,” type “pbw00930” in the first search box. Click “search.” Click on the thumbnail that appears, and then enlarge the image by clicking on the largest box below it.] *Purity*. Related to piety, a true woman believed sex was sinful and chose to be chaste, except to procreate. Women’s fashions of the 1830s through the 1850s were conservative, hiding a woman’s body and often her covering her head. True women dressed like a “lady.” This book cover shows a woman whose clothes cover her entire body, except for her face.
- 3) [In “Guided Search,” type “pba00553” in the first search box. Click “search.” Click on the thumbnail that appears, and then enlarge the image by clicking on the largest box below it.] *Domesticity*. The home was seen as the separate, proper sphere for a true woman. Because of her piety and chastity, she would be seen as morally superior to and purer than her husband, and thus better suited for child-rearing. Therefore, the “normal” profession for a true woman was motherhood. This book shows a weary mother.
- 4) [In “Guided Search,” type “pbw00884” in the first search box. Click “search.” Click on the thumbnail that appears, and then enlarge the image by clicking on the largest box below it.] *Submissiveness*. Despite his moral inferiority, a true woman would be tender toward her husband. She would sacrifice her happiness for his and be subservient to him. In fact, women would be subservient to all men, allowing them to do all the work outside the home and make all political decisions. This book shows a woman and man reading together. The woman is depicted as lower than the man, indicating her subservience to him. She also is seated beside him with her hands in her lap, while the man is seated at the table with his hands on the book.

The Movement for Women’s Rights

As early as 1840, when women were prohibited from serving as delegates to an anti-slavery conference, women began to fight for their rights to serve as equals in society—to work outside the home and to be recognized in the political sphere. The work women performed by necessity during the Civil War gave them organizational, occupational, and leadership skills. As more and more women pushed for women’s rights, the Cult of Domesticity was reversed, both in society and on the covers of books.

[In “Guided Search,” type “pba00662” in the first search box. Click “search.” Click on the thumbnail that appears, and then enlarge the image by clicking on the largest box

[below it.](#)] A true woman no longer had to be pious and pure. As women's fashions began to show more skin, book covers like this one began to depict women wearing racier clothing. [In "Guided Search," type "pba00560" in the first search box. Click "search." Click on the thumbnail that appears, and then enlarge the image by clicking on the largest box below it.] Books also began showing women riding bicycles and horses, activities that the older women (members of the Cult of True Womanhood) considered scandalous. On the cover of this book, the woman not only is riding a horse, but she also is hunting...with men. In fact, she is leading the charge.

[In "Guided Search," type "pba00683" in the first search box. Click "search." Click on the thumbnail that appears, and then enlarge the image by clicking on the largest box below it. Click on "other part" to show the dust jacket.] Obviously, women no longer were confined to the home. Many began working at jobs other than as wives and mothers. The cover of this book shows a woman with a shovel, surrounded by other tools of manual labor.

[In "Guided Search," type "pba00262" in the first search box. Click "search." Click on the thumbnail that appears, and then enlarge the image by clicking on the largest box below it.] As the women's movement gained strength, women no longer were considered submissive. This picture is the opposite of the book cover that depicted the woman as lower than the man, and thus subservient to him. On this cover, the woman is depicted as being higher than the man.

[In "Guided Search," type "pba01398" in the first search box. Click "search." Click on the thumbnail that appears, and then enlarge the image by clicking on the largest box below it.] No longer were men alone able to make political decisions, either. In 1920, women finally were granted suffrage and like men, they were able to vote. Even before then, women were elected to political office. This book shows an important woman approaching a government building.

Summary

The role of women in society changed dramatically between 1820 and 1920. During much of the 19th century, women were judged according to the Cult of Domesticity, which stated that true women must be pious, pure, domestic, and submissive. As women began fighting for their rights, the cult was reversed, until women were free from restrictive fashions and no longer confined to the home. In fact, they were able to work at any job and participate in the political system, just like men. Book bindings of the 19th and early 20th centuries reflect this shift from the Cult of True Womanhood to the achievement of women's suffrage.

Student Activities:

Activity 1 (Grades 6-8)

This activity should be completed as a class, with the instructor performing the searches and facilitating class discussion.

Although the Cult of Domesticity began earlier in the 19th century, widespread use of pictures on the covers of books did not occur until the 1840s. In this activity, students will compare the pictures on the covers of books published in the 1840s, during the height of the Cult of Domesticity, to pictures on the covers of books published in the 1920s, following the passage of women's suffrage.

First, search for book covers that depict women in the 1840s:

- 1) Go to "Guided Search" on the PBO site:
At <http://bindings.lib.ua.edu/sitesearch.html>, select the "Search by Keyword" link. Then, click on "Guided Search" at the top of the page.
- 2) In the top search box, type in "1840 or 1841 or 1842 or 1843 or 1844 or 1845 or 1846 or 1847 or 1848 or 1849." Select "date" in the last drop-down menu on that line.
- 3) In the second search box, type "women." Select "subject" from the last drop-down menu on that line.
- 4) At the bottom of the page, select "Display in Gallery" from the drop-down menu to the right of the word "Records."
- 5) Click "search."

Click on the first thumbnail and enlarge the picture by clicking on the large box under the illustration. Ask students what they notice about the book cover. What is its physical appearance like (i.e., color of cover and picture, size of picture, type of lettering, other designs)? How are women depicted on this book cover? Click on click on the right arrow (in the top-right corner of the screen) to move to the next cover. Repeat this exercise for all covers in this group. Take notes on the board so students have a reference point for comparison.

Now, search for book covers that depict women in the 1920s:

- 1) Go to "Guided Search" on the PBO site:
At <http://bindings.lib.ua.edu/sitesearch.html>, select the "Search by Keyword" link. Then, click on "Guided Search" at the top of the page.
- 2) In the top search box, type in "1920 or 1921 or 1922 or 1923 or 1924 or 1925 or 1926 or 1927 or 1928 or 1929." Select "date" in the last drop-down menu on that line.
- 3) In the second search box, type "women." Select "subject" from the last drop-down menu on that line.
- 4) In the third search line, select "not" from the first drop-down menu, type "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in the search box, select "as a phrase" in the next drop-down menu, and "title" from the last drop-down menu on that line.
- 5) At the bottom of the page, select "20" from the drop-down menu to the left of the word "Records," and "Display in Gallery" from the drop-down menu to the right.
- 6) Click "search."

Because there are several examples in this gallery, you may want to select four or five to examine closely. Click on each thumbnail separately, and return to the gallery (by clicking "Results" in the top-left corner) to select the next one to examine. You may

need to click on other illustrations (such as dust jackets or endpapers) in order to see the depiction of women. Ask the same questions about these covers that you did for the 1840s books.

Using the notes on the board for reference, the class should now compare the book covers of the 1840s to the covers of the 1920s:

- What differences or similarities do they notice about the physical appearance of the covers?
- What differences or similarities do they notice about the depiction of women?
- What have the students learned about the ability for book bindings to reflect historical events and attitudes?
- How do they think women should be depicted on book covers today, and why?

Activity 2 (Grades 9-12)

Students can complete the following activity individually or in small groups. The activity may be completed in class or as a homework assignment. Students should write down their answers and be prepared to discuss them in class.

Several authors have written books dealing with women's themes. Students/groups should select (or the teacher should assign each student/group) one of the following writers to study:

George Cary Eggleston
Annie Fellows Johnston
Nell Speed

Students should search the PBO database for books about women by these authors. To do so, they will:

- 1) Go to "Guided Search" on the PBO site:
At <http://bindings.lib.ua.edu/sitesearch.html>, select the "Search by Keyword" link. Then, click on "Guided Search" at the top of the page.
- 2) In the top search box, type in the selected/assigned author's name. Select "all of these" in the first drop-down menu on that line, and "name" in the second drop-down menu.
- 3) In the second search box, type "women." Select "subject" from the last drop-down menu on that line.
- 4) At the bottom of the page, select "Display in Gallery" from the drop-down menu to the right of the word "Records."
- 5) Click "search."

Students should study each book cover that appears. They will click on each thumbnail to see a larger image of the cover, other images (e.g., spine, dust jacket, end papers), and information about the book (i.e., publisher, date of publication). Once familiar with the author's work, students will determine what the book covers say about:

- women's history at the time of publication; and
- the author's feelings about women's place in society.

Once students have completed this exercise, the class should discuss its findings. Each author should be discussed individually, noting any differences and similarities of opinion among students/groups who studied the same author. The teacher may find it helpful to bring up the author's books in gallery view, following the instructions above, so that all students in the class can see the covers for that writer's work. The teacher also should make notes on the board about each author so students will have a reference point for comparison.

After each author has been discussed, the class should compare and contrast the bindings for all three authors' books. The following questions may be used to facilitate discussion:

- What differences or similarities do they notice about the physical appearance of the covers?
- What differences or similarities do they notice about what each author's work says about women's history at the time of publication?
- What differences or similarities do they notice about each author's feelings about the place of women in society?
- What have the students learned about the ability for book bindings to reflect historical events and attitudes?
- How do they think women should be depicted on book covers today?

For additional teaching resources on Women's History, see:

National Women's History Project, Learning Place, American Memory, Library of Congress, <http://www.nwhp.org/tp/links/links.html>.

Votes for Women: Selections from the National American Women's Suffrage Association Collection, 1848-1921, American Memory, Library of Congress, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/naw/nawshom.html>.

Women in America, University of Virginia, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/Fem/home.htm>.

Women in American History, Encyclopedia Britannica, <http://search.eb.com/women/studyguide/index.html>.

Women Who Changed History, Scholastic, <http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/women/index.htm>.