

Publishers' Bindings Online, 1815-1930: The Art of Books
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Sample Lesson Plan: Women Writers of the 19th Century
Grades 6-12

This lesson will take at least two class periods, plus out-of-class time for students to complete an in-depth assignment (approximately one week).

Objectives:

- Students will learn that although many women published during the 19th century, they were criticized by both general society and the literary community.
- Through the study of individual writers (both in class and outside of class), students will understand the characteristics of each writer and her work as well as connections among 19th century American women writers as a group.

Materials:

A computer with an Internet connection and a large screen or other capability to display the teacher's actions to the entire class.

Lesson

Introduction

Just as women in general have played an important role in American history, women writers have been an integral part of literary history. This is particularly true in the 19th century, when women shifted from adhering to the criteria of the "Cult of Domesticity" to fighting for equal rights.

Using 19th century book bindings for illustration, this lesson explores women writers—known as "domestic goddesses"—who both reflected and changed the trends of womanhood.

American Literature and the Cult of Domesticity

The period between 1820 and the start of the Civil War saw the growth of the middle class in America, and the men increasingly went 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 true womanhood that came about featured four characteristics: extreme religiosity; sexual chastity; dedication to motherhood; and submission to her husband.

To avoid the stigma of failure to meet the cult's criteria, many young women relied on magazines and books for advice. [\[Teacher's Note: Go to](#)

<http://bindings.lib.ua.edu/sitesearch.html>, select the “Search by Keyword” link, and click on “Guided Search” at the top of the page. In the first search box, type in pbw00982. Click on the thumbnail of the book cover, then enlarge the illustration by clicking on the largest of the three boxes under it.] Ask students what items they see on the front of this book, *First Aid to the Young Housekeeper*. What sort of advice do they think the book contains based on the pictures. Manuals of this sort often contained advice on a number of topics that would help the woman adhere to the characteristics of true womanhood: how to cook, how to clean properly, how to garden, how to take care of your children; embroidery, dressmaking, fashion; how to act in public.

This atmosphere gave rise to a literary movement of domestic goddesses. These were women who wrote novels, poetry, and non-fiction (such as advice manuals and journalism) about “domestic” subjects. Specifically, their work discussed home life, children, relationships between women, and women’s issues such as religion, voting, and slavery.

Although many domestic goddesses wrote about criteria of the Cult of Domesticity, they typically did not meet them. To work as writers, these women either chose not to have families or were accused of neglecting the children they had. Not only did general society not regard these writers as “true women,” but the literary community did not take them seriously. In fact, a famous novelist of the time—Nathaniel Hawthorne—called these authors a “mob of scribbling women,” and their writings, “trash.”

Nonetheless, their work was widely read by women, and many of the authors are famous names today.

Some Famous Domestic Goddesses

- *Sarah Josepha Buell Hale* [In guided search, type pba00376 in the first search box. Click on the thumbnail.]
Sarah Hale founded *Ladies’ Magazine* in 1827 to better acquaint young women with their duties, a purpose she continued as editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book* for 40 years, beginning in 1837. The widowed mother of five also wrote several books, both fiction and non-fiction, to support her family. [Click on the spine image.] She published her first book, *Northwood*, in 1827. This edition was published in 1852.
- *Harriet Beecher Stowe* [In guided search, type pbw00216 in the first search box. Click on the thumbnail.]
The daughter of a minister who preached against slavery, Harriet Beecher Stowe grew up in a reform-minded household. A teacher and mother of seven children, Stowe was moved by the plight of runaway slaves she knew and wrote her most famous book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, in 1851. She wrote several other books as well. This was her first book, *The Mayflower*. It was first published in 1843, but this edition was published in 1865.
- *Fanny Fern* [In guided search, type pba01280 in the first search box. Click on the thumbnail.]

Once widowed and once divorced, Sarah Willis turned to journalism to support her two daughters. As the daughter of early 19th century newspaper editor Nathaniel Willis, it was a natural profession. Written under the pen name Fanny Fern, Willis's columns were so popular, they were collected into volumes and sold in the U.S. and England. Many of her columns dealt with women's issues, such as suffrage. She also wrote novels. [\[Click on the spine image.\]](#) This one, *Ruth Hall*, was published in 1854.

- *Louisa May Alcott* [\[In guided search, type pbw00894 in the first search box. Click on the thumbnail.\]](#)

Louisa May Alcott came from a poor family and vowed to find work anywhere she could to help make ends meet. The tomboy worked at several jobs before becoming a writer. [\[Click on the spine image.\]](#) Her first book, *Flower Fables*, was published in 1854. This edition was published in 1900. Alcott is best known for her book *Little Women*. Published in 1868, the book is based on Alcott's relationship with her own sisters.

- *Sarah Orne Jewett* [\[In guided search, type pbw00223 in the first search box. Click on the thumbnail.\]](#)

Sarah Jewett's fiction is characterized by intimate views of characters' lives and the growth and trials of friendship. The wealthy Jewett never married and traveled extensively. She also was friends with several major literary figures of her time, including Mark Twain. *Deephaven*, pictured here, was her first book. Published in 1877, it consists of a variety of related sketches.

- *Mary E. Wilkins Freeman* [\[In guided search, type pbw00637 in the first search box. Click on the thumbnail.\]](#)

Born into poverty, Mary Wilkins Freeman began working at a young age to help her family. She first earned money as a writer in 1881—when she was nearly 30, and published many collections of stories from then on. Freeman did not marry until she was 50, and had no children. She continued to support herself with her writing after committing her husband to a mental hospital and legally separating from him. Themes of her writing included the inner world of women, marriage, morality of women, and rebellious women. She also wrote children's stories, such as those collected in this 1897 book, *Once Upon a Time*.

- *Edith Wharton* [\[In guided search, type pbw00980 in the first search box. Click on the thumbnail.\]](#)

Edith Wharton was an upper-class woman, descended from a participant in the Boston Tea Party, among other historic figures. Her characters largely were based on people she knew in New York aristocracy, and her female characters typically were strong women. The divorcee began writing at an early age but did not publish her first book until 1897, when she was 35. This book, *Italian Backgrounds*, was published in 1905. She later became the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize, which she received for her 1921 novel *Age of Innocence*.

Discussion questions

- 1) What do the book bindings we saw tell us about the work of these women?
- 2) What do these domestic goddesses have in common?

- 3) What differences do you see among them?
- 4) Why would society not regard them as “true women”?
- 5) Why would Hawthorne consider their writing “trash”?
- 6) Why is their work important today?

Assignment

There are many American women writers in the 19th century that we have not discussed.

Following is a list of more American women who published in the 19th century.

Addams, Jane	Hamilton, Gail (Mary Abigail Dodge)
Bates, Katharine Lee	Lambert, Mary Eliza Perine Tucker
Beers, Ethel Lynn	Lazarus, Emma
Burnett, Frances Hodgson	Leslie, Eliza
Cather, Willa	Matthews, Victoria Earle
Child, Lydia Marie	Murray, Judith Sargent
Chopin, Kate	Nelson, Alice Dunbar
Davis, Rebecca Harding	Phelps, Elizabeth Stuart
Dickinson, Emily	Spofford, Harriet Prescott
Dodge, Mary Mapes	Truth, Sojourner
Fuller, Margaret	Warner, Susan
Gilman, Charlotte Perkins	Whitman, Sarah Helen Power
Glasgow, Ellen	Wiggin, Kate Douglas
Gould, Hannah	Wilcox, Ella Wheeler

Students should select or be assigned one woman writer. A good way to do this is to cut out all of the women’s names and place them in a bowl or hat, then have each student pull out a name. Ideally, each author will be assigned to only one student.

Each student will do research on his or her selected author to answer the following questions (It may be helpful to distribute the questions to students in an assignment sheet):

- 1) Author's birth year and death year
- 2) Ancestry: what did her parents do for a living; did she have any famous ancestors?
- 3) Circumstances of childhood (how many siblings; was the family wealthy or poor; was the writer educated, and if so, did she go to school or learn on her own)
- 4) Was she married, and if so, was she widowed or divorced?
- 5) What was her economic situation as an adult?
- 6) How many children did she have, if any?
- 7) When did she begin writing professionally?
- 8) Was there a particular reason that she needed to write for money?
- 9) Did she hold other jobs in addition to writing?
- 10) What were her most notable works?
- 11) What themes existed in her work, particularly concerning women?
- 12) Compare this writer to those discussed in class: how is she similar, and how is she different?

To conduct research, student could consult biographies of the writer, criticisms of her work, and any primary sources available (such as her diary, autobiography, letters, etc.). Internet sources are acceptable but should not be the only means of research.

Students should write a report answering these questions and including a bibliography of sources. They should be given up to one week to complete the research.

On the date the report is due, students should present their findings to the class. Presentation of reports may take more than one class period.