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Extended Abstract
The Ideal Young Woman in 19th Century America

Background

Long before settling on a specific topic for my English honors thesis, I was interested in 19th century writing by American women and the female characters in these novels, particularly Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Characters such as Jo March, whose tomboyish behavior is suppressed over the course of the novel, raise issues of the cultural definition of girlhood and standards of behavior for young women. Scholarly articles on 19th century femininity provide little information on what was expected of young women during this era, so I turned to primary sources. In the past five years a lot of material that was previously unavailable has become accessible online, allowing me to get a view of what contemporary women would have been reading. My research was driven by my own questions about what girls were being taught, and my goal for the project was to determine the specific standards they absorbed over the course of adolescence.

Methods

Guided by academic work on 19th century womanhood, I sought out conduct and etiquette books, a popular instructional genre during this era that outlines the rules of etiquette for various demographics. These books were widely read by women at this time, and therefore provided a glimpse of the messages being conveyed to young women about how they should act. Within the conduct book genre, I looked at books for mothers regarding the raising of children as well as books aimed at adolescent girls who were

entering society. These books were available through repositories such as Google Books and archive.org. I identified popular texts by looking at the prevalence of multiple editions on WorldCat. I worked under my thesis advisor, Katharine Kittredge, over the course of the fall semester to analyze these works in conjunction with each other. The first chapter of my thesis, which will serve as the core of my oral presentation, was the culmination of this work.

Results

The texts I used ranged from conservative to liberal in terms of the authors' opinions and suggestions. Some authors were anonymous; others were famous female intellectuals and writers of the time. I used a historical lens to consider these texts, and looked at each author's specifications for appropriate female behavior in three categories: intellectual activity, public conduct, and physical activity. Using these three categories was the most effective way of organizing the larger idea of standards of behavior, and within each section I analyzed each author's views. Despite some small differences in opinion, the authors were largely in agreement about a how a woman should behave in society, which allowed me to gain a better understanding of the prevalent expectations for women. According to these texts, the ideal young woman employed her intelligence only to the extent that it helped her succeed in domestic life: supporting her husband, raising her children, and running her household. In contrast, she carefully avoided intellectual distinction in social situations; she never expressed her opinions, avoided all conflict, had perfect posture, and rarely left her home alone. These contrasting images set up a complex duality: a woman was expected to be intelligent, competent, and active in the

privacy of her own home, but could not exhibit any individuality or independence in public.

Discussion

I intend to look at the contemporaneous literature of the time to see how this behavior is reflected in female fictional characters. This would also allow me to see how conduct books and popular fiction were working together to define and enforce the dominant ideal of femininity. An understanding of the impact of popular media on women's self-representation is extremely relevant to women's lives both then and now. These images and "rules" could be considered the root of modern women's difficulty in expressing their emotions while still being respected. The ideal woman was—and still is—the product of standards that are literally impossible to uphold. It is interesting to consider these very specific requirements in a modern context, when women's identities are no longer solely defined by their domestic performance, but self-control and a suppression of strong emotions continued to be required of women in the public sphere.

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