


Reading Response #4

In her 1966 article, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” Barbara Welter defines True Womanhood as the virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity and argues that they were the most important aspects of how American women were evaluated in society in the early-mid 19th century.¹ Welter’s argument is correct because even women who advocated for greater rights for women underscore the prevalence of the virtues of True Womanhood in the 19th century.

One woman who campaigned for women’s rights and abolition of slavery was Sojourner Truth. In her 1851 speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?” Truth ~~had stated how one man in the audience believed that women should be helped into carriages, lifted over ditches, and have the best place everywhere, but Truth herself did not receive any of these treatments.~~² Truth argued that one of the defining factors of a woman in that time period was to be treated a certain way,  yet she was not treated as such, even being a woman. ~~This description of one man’s beliefs that women should be helped into carriages, over ditches, and have the best place everywhere corresponds to one of the pillars of True Womanhood—submissiveness.~~ Women being helped into carriages and lifted over ditches ~~is an example of how~~ women were expected to be dependent on men. This

¹ Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151-174.

² Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman?” 1851.

dependency supports Welter's claim that submissiveness was one of the most important ways in which a woman was judged by herself and others in the 19th century.³ Although Truth was an advocate for women's rights, her speech addressing the expectations of a woman in that time period is evidence that the ideals of True Womanhood was prevalent.

Another advocate, specifically for women's rights in political involvement, was Lydia Drake. In a list she wrote in 1840, Drake listed the reasons why many believed women should not have political equality with men in a satirical manner to ridicule them and effectively argue against the ideals of True Womanhood.⁴ Some of the items on her list included: "She would be entirely out of her sphere," "It would give offence to some, and it is a woman's province to please not to offend," and "She would lose her sense of dependence on man."⁵ Drake's first reason, that a woman would be entirely out of her sphere, alludes to the domesticity aspect of True Womanhood. Welter had argued that in the 19th century a woman's sphere was domestic and consisted of responsibilities in the home. Drake having chosen to include the "out of her sphere" proves that a women's sphere and domesticity truly did exist in that time period. Her second reason that women's involvement in politics would offend some and it is a woman's place to please others is an example of the submissiveness and domesticity ideals of True Womanhood. And her third reason, that women would lose their dependence on man, is also representative of submissiveness. Because so many of the items that Drake listed fall into one or more of the categories (or virtues) of what True Womanhood is defined as, it shows that women's rights advocates were inherently arguing against the ideals of True Womanhood.

³ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," 158.

⁴ Lydia Drake, "Notes for a Speech," 1840.

⁵ Lydia Drake, "Notes for a Speech," 1840.

supporting the claim that even these advocates can be used to show that those ideals were prevalent in that time period.

One more woman who was an advocate for women's rights in the 19th century was Harriet H. Robinson. In her 1883 biography, Robinson used her experiences as a woman working in a factory in that time period to argue that women in these job positions were among the lowest in social standing and did not fit into the ideals of True Womanhood.⁶ Specifically, Robinson wrote that a woman "was represented as subjected to influences that must destroy her purity and self-respect."⁷ These influences being early factory labor conditions for women, Robinson is raising awareness of the difficulties of the factory life for women and that it impacted their dignity or virtues. Purity being one of the key virtues of True Womanhood (that Welter argues), Robinson specifically addressing it shows that these virtues were prevalent or common.

Harriet H. Robinson, Lydia Drake, and Sojourner Truth were all women that supported greater rights for women in that time period and addressed women's issues stemming from True Womanhood ideals. They are examples of how even women who chose to bring attention to (or actively advocated for) the increase of women's rights in the 19th century are evidence that the ideals of True Womanhood (purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity) existed in this time period.

⁶ Harriet H. Robinson, "Early Factory Labor in New England," 1883.

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