

American women, 1870s and 1880s



Actress Lillian Russell
(1861-1922)

Paper #1

- **Due: January 25; 2-3 pages on one of the following:**
- Margaret Sanger wanted women to escape “slave maternity”: she believed that women could never be free until they gained control over their own reproductive capacities. However, her arguments in *Woman and the New Race* differ in key respects from those of contemporary feminists, who generally not only support access to birth control, but also believe that women benefit from access to safe and legal abortion. Discuss how do Margaret Sanger’s views in this document reflect the particular historical context in which she wrote.
- In her response to Dr. Edward Clarke’s book, *Sex and Education*, Julia Ward Howe advanced a number of arguments to rebut his claims about the effects of co-education on young women. Some of her points seem recognizably “feminist” in the contemporary sense, whereas others sound quite odd to modern ears. Write a paper analyzing Howe’s essay. To your mind, was she able to develop a convincing critique of Clarke’s views? Why or why not?

US, ca. 1870

- Population: 39 million
- US Census of 1870
 - White: 87%
 - Black or “mulatto”: more than 12%
 - Indians: 26,000; Chinese: 64,000
 - Mexican-American not a category
 - 20% illiteracy
 - Much higher among blacks than whites

Justifying inequality

- Colonial era: Women weaker/inferior
 - Lesser versions of men
 - Biblical notion:
 - Women were conceived from men
 - Household as a “little commonwealth”
- 19th century: Emphasis on *difference*
 - Emphasis on biology
 - Social life had to follow the “laws of nature”
 - Idea of “separate spheres”: women designed for domesticity
 - Highly racialized (and class based) ideology

Women as citizens

- Always recognized as citizens in some ways
 - Subjected to, protected by, the same laws
 - Issued passports
 - Single and widowed women obliged to pay taxes
- Denied the full rights of citizenship and exempted from many obligations
 - Could not vote
 - Not allowed (or required) to serve on juries
 - Not required (or allowed) to take up arms to defend the nation
- Women's citizenship was largely *derivative*
 - Obligation to husbands and families, not the state
 - Their "rights" defined mainly as the right to protection

Legal status

- American Revolution did not improve women's legal status
- Extended the concept of coverture
 - “By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law; that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband; under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything.” (William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*)

Implications

- A wife could not sue; be sued
- Could not form contracts
- Limited legal responsibility for her actions
- Wives did not control their own earnings
- No concept of marital rape
- No right to one's own children

What had changed by 1870?

- Nearly all states had passed married women's property acts by the 1870s
- Most states allowed women to claim children in cases of divorce/desertion
 - Doctrine of the “tender years”
 - By late 19th century, most separated or divorced women received custody of their children
 - Maternal custody seen as in the child's “best interest”
- Earnings laws
 - By 1887, 2/3rds of states had passed such laws
 - Protected a woman's earnings from husband's creditors
 - Some laws also allowed women to form contracts

14th Amendment

- Designed to give black men citizenship
- Proposed in 1866; ratified in 1868
- Most significant change to the Constitution since the Bill of Rights
 - Broad definition of citizenship
 - BUT, introduced the word “male” into the U.S. Constitution for the first time
- Opposed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony
 - New strains of racism/nativism within suffrage movement

15th Amendment

- Designed to enfranchise former male slaves:
 - “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”
 - Does not include “sex” as a protected status
 - Amendment proposed in 1869; would be ratified in 1870

Split in the movement

- ECS and SBA establish the National Woman Suffrage Association (founded in 1869)
 - Only admitted women
 - Campaigned for a federal amendment
 - Addressed a range of issues
 - Divorce laws; employment discrimination
- The American Woman Suffrage Association (1869)
 - Admitted men and women
 - Believed in a gradual, state-by-state approach
 - Focused only on suffrage

Education

- 1850: Closing of literacy gap
- By 1860s, girls attended school at roughly the same rate as boys
- 1870s-1880s massive growth of secondary education
 - From the 1870s to 1900, female high school students outnumbered males
 - 1880 census showed female literacy rates actually *higher* than male literacy rates
 - Huge change from a century before

Access to college

- 1870-1900 Growing numbers of elite women begin attending college
 - Opening of women's colleges after the CW
 - 1865: Vassar; 1870s: Smith and Wellesley
 - Public universities usually co-educational
 - 1862: Morrill Land Act
 - 1870 women were 21% of the college population; by 1900, they were 35%
- Why this change?
 - Need for women teachers
 - Many single women in the wake of the CW
- Huge impact on women's reform

Sex in Education, 1873

- Dr. Edward Clarke
- Collegiate education for women a violation of the laws of nature
- Influenced by evolutionary theory
 - Evoked the specter of racial decline
- Echoed concerns of others who feared the effects of modern American life
 - 1869: Neurologist George Beard coined the term “neurasthenia”
- Bestseller; went through 17 editions



19th-century views of the body

- Closed energy system
 - Limited amount of “nerve force”
 - Men thought to possess more “nerve force”
- Women as prisoners of their reproductive functions
 - “It was as if the Almighty, in creating the female sex, had taken the uterus and built up the woman around it.”
- Menstruation viewed as an illness
 - “leak” in the energy circuit

Background

- 1868: New England Women's Club established
 - One founding members was Julia Ward Howe
 - Lecturer, writer, women's rights advocate
- 1872: Club invited Edward H. Clarke to speak on the subject of higher education for women
 - Very successful physician
 - Specialized in disorders of the eyes and nerves
 - Former professor at Harvard's medical school
 - Clarke declared, "Girls can do the same things as boys and to the same extent, but not in the same way."

Sex in Education

- How does Clarke define education, and what does he see as its purposes?
According to Clarke, what happens when women approach intellectual pursuits in the same way as men? What does he mean when he suggests that they must "respect their own organization"? What does he see as the proper "girl's way" to study, as opposed to the "boy's way"?

Assessing the book's impact

- Appeared when college education for women still very new
- Book did not impact the rise in female college students
- But it does suggest substantial anxiety surrounding this new social trend

Julia Ward Howe



Portrait of Julia Ward Howe, ca. 1898. From the Julia Ward Howe Papers, 1857-1961. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

Howe's response

- How does Howe respond to Clarke's claims?
 - Not proper science
 - Doesn't take into account other causes of women's ill health
 - Doesn't take into account climate
 - Girls aren't allowed to run free, develop their physical (and mental) health
 - Objects to his views of single women as unnatural freaks

Association of Collegiate Alumnae

- Women college graduates who organized in the 1880s
- Set out to disprove Clarke's claims
- Surveyed its 1300 members and published results in 1885-86
 - 80% reported good or excellent health after graduate
 - As many women reported that their health improved during college as those who reported that it declined
 - In a narrow sense, the report closed the debate