

**A Thousand Words:
Messages in the Illustrations of Turn-of-the-Century Periodicals**
By Sonja Lynch

During the nineteenth century, periodicals were published with ever-increasing volume and readership. Weekly and monthly magazines, whose dominant audience was the "woman of the house," attracted quite a following and became highly successful during the second half of that century. Their readership continued to be quite strong into the twentieth century, when even more publications for burgeoning audiences continued to appear. The pictures which appeared in these magazines, both drawings and photographs, reflected general beliefs and/or ideas held at the time, and promoted new ideas or possibilities as well. By focusing on the illustrations found in a few of the periodicals of this time, roughly 1885 to 1920, one can discern how they serve to reinforce, disseminate and/or create realities, stereotypes, attitudes and general information about women in education at the turn-of-the-century. Sketches and cartoons, the primary forms of illustration of the time, reveal both idealistic and stereotypical images; these in turn reflect something of the tone and tenor of the time.

Two types of publications are used in this study. First there are general periodicals intended for a wide audience. It is safe to assume, however, that the vast majority of their readers were female. These magazines give a glimpse of the wider social picture, the general views of the nation - or the class or region of the country to which the magazine was geared. The second type of periodical is geared toward a much narrower audience: educators. Publications for and about teachers or school superintendents are generally more favorable in their depictions of women in the educational sphere than the more general publications, but this is understandable when one realizes that women educators (or women interested in education) often played a role in the development of such journals.

While it may seem that magazines as diverse as *Harper's Bazar* and *The School Board Journal* would have very little in common, this is not really the case. It is true that there are some images which are found more in one type of publication than the other, but they also share a number of themes and images. Such a delineation can also be revealing. Let us begin this discussion with a look at the more general publications, such as *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Harper's Bazar*, and *Life*. Their pages are filled with stories of love and marriage, of fashions and the patterns with which to create the latest styles, of advice for young wives regarding children and for young women regarding men. The women's magazines of the time were only partially revealing concerning academic females, but their relative absence tells us something. What the publishers perceived to be the primary concerns of the women in that day were love and marriage and family. The preponderance of articles and fiction dealing with women trying to get their man or of ways to make themselves more attractive so

as to win his heart, and their accompanying illustrations, far outweighs the number of articles on any other subject.

The idea that marriage and a family are going to solve the dilemma of a young woman's future is very much alive and well in these magazines, and they perpetuate this same sort of idea when a woman is depicted in an academic or collegiate setting. Some of these periodicals belittle the woman in academe, implying that a degree is of little use to her. *Life* magazine, in particular, repeatedly used this as a source of humor. For example, the June 19, 1890 issue devoted an entire double-page spread to a drawing by O. Herford captioned, "The sweet girl graduate goes forth from the castle of learning to do battle with the wicked world."

It shows her poised on a steed whose body is a "book of Useless Information" (vol.12), and she is accompanied by a cupid-like cherub. Two doves (love birds?), along with several professors who wave white handkerchiefs from the turret window, see her off. The handle of her long, thin lance is adorned with a heart-shaped decoration on its end, and one gets the impression that very little harm could actually be done by her weapon. Opposing her on the other side of the drawbridge is a very masculine world whose lance, poised and ready, seems easily four times the size of her dainty one. The expression on the face of this "knight" makes him appear much more knowledgeable and wise than the "sweet girl graduate" who rides out to meet him. He gazes at her with a patronizing smile that seems to suggest that she'll soon learn the folly of her ways.

There are many details in this cartoon which serve to express the artist's ideas concerning female education. To begin with, although the perspective places the woman closer to us, we don't see her face completely. It is turned just enough for us to realize that she isn't facing her opponent in the manner that he is facing her. Rather, her attention is focused down, toward the cherub running alongside her horse. Her downcast eyes would suggest either that she doesn't really want to face the world or that she has other things on her mind. Secondly, the figure she is charging out to meet is standing still, on seemingly higher ground than she, and thus, he appears to have a greater advantage and to be better prepared for this fight. There is very little doubt as to the outcome of the impending battle. The feminine soldier, bedecked with armor and a plumed mortarboard is no match for the experienced, masculine world, cherub or no cherub to help her.

This same sort of idea could still be found in the pages of *Life* fifteen years later. The June 1, 1905 issue sported a cartoon depicting two graduates in caps and gowns, one male, the other female, next to a large spherical world.

The woman, books and diploma in hand, is crouched down, brandishing a flaming stick, apparently trying to set the world on fire as the man stands watching, hands on hips. Her comment, "Why! The nasty old thing won't burn. It must be wet," emphasizes the fact that her efforts are futile. This, coupled with

the attitude of her male counterpart who towers above her and whose pose suggests some measure of disgust with her actions (one might imagine him saying, "Don't you know better than that?"), brings her education into question. She doesn't know enough to realize that she can't set the world on fire. It isn't that the globe is wet; it simply can't be done. In the eyes of this artist, at least, (different from the previous one) the attitudes towards women graduates haven't changed much in the past fifteen years. Their educations are still not of much use when it comes to conquering the world.

Two weeks later, in the June 15, 1905 issue of *Life*, the same idea was used in another cartoon by this same artist. It shows a flock of women graduates streaming out of the university gates, caps and gowns over their long dresses, as they chase the figure of an older man in top hat and tails whose head resembles a globe. The caption reads, "Look out, old world! The gates are open again."

Upon first glance, the women in this picture seem to have changed a bit from the depiction of the "sweet girl graduate" knight of 1890. They are running with some energy toward the world, their eyes are open, and they appear to have some chance of catching up to their quarry. However, upon closer inspection, there is one figure in this picture that reveals the same old attitudes at work. Quite a bit farther back in the line of women, near the gates themselves, one of the graduates has stumbled and fallen. Her books, paper, and pencils are strewn on the ground in front of her, and she is down on her knees, attempting to rise. A couple of her classmates notice her as they run around the obstacle, but none of them seem to be intending to help her up. She is a very minor part in this drawing. We don't see her face at all, and she is so far back and obscure in the picture that she might be easily overlooked. However, there is significance in the fact that she is present in the picture at all. Her fall takes the wind out of the sails of these graduates. It implies that they are no better than anyone else, and, in fact, they may be prone to stumble or to be tripped up.

It is perhaps significant that no illustrations of quite this disparaging nature were found in the publications that were considered specifically women's magazines. It may be that they realized that some of their audience would be women graduates and they did not wish to alienate them. Or, it might simply be that their artists did not share these views or draw them in quite this way.

Just as this kind of "nose thumbing" at women's education was evident only in publications intended for a broader audience, some other themes lent themselves more appropriately to educational publications. Teachers, in their roles as nurturers and guardians of the young, is one such image. This was taken up with some frequency in the *School Board Journal*. In 1906, for example, this publication ran a cartoon drawn by "W. R. Hearst's cartoonist" depicting the mother and the teacher as "partners."

The mother appears to be handing over her two children, a small boy and girl, to the young, pretty female teacher as the two women shake hands. The four are meeting in the middle of a road; behind the mother is a house, and behind the

teacher stands a school. Although these two women are two sides of a very balanced picture, it is interesting to note (especially in light of the pictures discussed above) that the teacher appears to be on slightly higher ground than the mother. The mother is looking up to the teacher, who is smiling her reassurances to the former. While the two are shaking hands as partners, the teacher is the one receiving the children; they are being put in her care. And with one hand on her hip and her sleeves rolled up to the elbows, she appears to be ready to go to work. In marked contrast to the previous sketches, this one shows the female educator to be in control. There is little doubt that she is suited to the task at hand and that she will succeed.

A little later that same year, 1906, the *School Board Journal* ran another cartoon that glorified this position of the teacher as the guardian of the young even more. Above a caption that reads, "The future welfare of the nation is in the hands of the public school teachers," this sketch shows what appears to be an army of young women carrying banners and flags proclaiming, "American Schools for the sake of the children" and "God bless our boys and girls" and "The hope of the country is in the schools."

These women are young and pretty, but they are also determined and purposeful. They look proud to be responsible for the welfare of the nation's future. No shrinking knights of love, these. Rather, in their high collars, suitcoats, ties, and hats, they appear ready to conquer the world.

In fact, this militant spirit on the part of the nation's school teachers is, understandably, something found only in publications geared toward educators and education. These publications not only published the latest news regarding what was going on in the school systems around the country, but they served as morale-boosters, too, and in the face of extremely low wages and less-than-adequate working conditions, this was a very important function. The *School Board Journal* for 1906 alone is filled with reminders and depictions of teachers in their plight to get a payraise. In all of these drawings, the teacher is depicted as a woman, and in most of them she is quite young and good-looking.

In what is perhaps the most biting of all of these cartoons, a teacher's salary is placed on the scales opposite that of a political office holder.

The teacher, a young woman who carries a teacher's diploma in one hand, rests her other hand on the scale on which she has placed her few money pieces. On the other end of the scales, the office-holder, a rich, Bluto-type character in top hat and tails, a cigar in the corner of his mouth, is continuing to place his income on the scale tray. He is sitting on the ground with bags of money labeled as "Overtime Grab" and "Extras" all around him. Needless to say, the message is very clear.

Despite the obvious differences in the content of some of the illustrations in these two types of periodicals, there are a great many more similarities than dissimilarities among them. Chief of these is the idea that a woman remains a

female no matter what she does with her life. Although she may be educated, she doesn't cease to be a woman with womanly concerns and weaknesses. Men and vanity are her two most obvious vices. Indeed, it seems quite apparent that, at least in some people's eyes, academia was the place for the young woman of the time to get her "MRS" degree. *Life* ran a drawing by Otho Cushing on the cover page of its June 14, 1900 issue entitled, "The Spring Examinations."

It shows a courtroom scene with a woman graduate in cap and gown on one side of the judge's bench and two men, one in similar attire, the other in athletic clothes, on the other. The judge, Cupid in cap and gown, asks the woman, "Which weighs the most (with you), a pound of brains or a pound of muscle?" There are a number of notable things about this picture, not the least of which is the assumption that the woman has but one course in life and the biggest decision she will have to make concerns whether her husband will have brains or brawn. The drawing itself reinforces this idea by attaching a train to the woman's dress which flows out from beneath her academic gown and is arranged on the floor in much the same way as a bridal gown's train is posed for wedding pictures. The decision appears to be between fairly equal options. The men in question are very nearly identical, except for the clothes they are wearing, and the long pole (a rowing oar?) held by the athlete visually divides them, suggesting that they might be mirror images of each other or two sides of the same person.

In a similar vein, a 1910 issue of the *School Board Journal* ran a cartoon titled, "A Broad Hint" in which Professor Literature (a man) is seen standing at Miss Primer's door talking to her as she peers out from her room.

While Professor Literature is obviously quite interested in this pretty woman, asking, "Isn't the line from Shakespeare beautiful, 'The friends thou hast, and their adoption tried, grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel?'," she is even more obvious in her reply, saying, "I think hoops of gold would be better." The sketch itself might lead one to think that Miss Primer is shutting the door on Professor Literature, but the expression on her face, one of enraptured gazing into his eyes, would refute this idea. She is, more likely than not, wanting to invite him in for a bit.

Some people feared that educating a woman would destroy her abilities as, or her desire to become, a wife and mother. This concern was brought up in "The Woman in Love" by Gertrude Atherton in the May, 1910 issue of *Harper's Bazar*. While Atherton ultimately favors the idea of education for women who desire it, she also acknowledges that it will change their perspectives on life somewhat. The notable part of this article in this context is the title illustration: two graduates, a woman and a man, reaching toward each other, but not quite meeting, in front of a blossoming tree.

They both hold diplomas, but while he grasps his firmly, close to his heart, hers is held more lightly down by her side, as if to imply that it may not mean as much or be as necessary for her future.

One thing that is continually noticeable in these pictures of graduates in their caps and gowns is that while the men wear their gowns closed in the front, the women's gowns are always open, revealing their dress underneath. This may be because this was the fashion of the day, but it also serves in a subtle way as reassurance that the woman is still a woman, even with her degree. She is female under that attire; she hasn't yet taken to dressing completely like a man.

This idea of women in education still being female comes through quite clearly even in the school-centered publications. In one cartoon in the *School Board Journal*, when Miss Primer asks Miss Grammar to judge her teaching ability, the request is quickly withdrawn when Miss Grammar wants to make sure that her colleague wouldn't feel offended by her response. These women, like women everywhere, have their pride, after all.

For centuries it was thought that a woman's constitution was more feeble than a man's, that she was more susceptible to illness, and that her nerves were weaker. This idea survived well into the twentieth century, and it was reinforced in a number of ways, including advertisements in these periodicals. One such, proclaims that "A shade is only as good as its roller.... Her nerve-energy is too precious to squander on balky window shades."

The woman in the sketch is a young teacher, book in hand, who is addressing her class while pulling down the shade. That she can look the other way with a calm, slightly smiling attitude, reinforces the placid message that the Hartshorn Shade company wishes to convey while simultaneously implying that, because she is a woman, her nerves are not very strong.

Education happens on a number of levels, and all of these, from one's initial lessons at home through the university, have been recorded in the illustrations of various periodicals. The following should shed some additional light on the attitudes and ideas being perpetuated around the turn-of-the-century concerning girls and their schooling.

To begin with, the first lessons children were taught happened at home, or, a bit later, in kindergarten or primary school settings. Two illustrations by Alice Barber Stephens depicting these early years in a girl's schooling appeared in the June and July, 1910 issues of *Harper's Bazar*. "A Lesson in Deportment" shows a teacher sitting in a circle of youngsters who are watching two of their classmates, a boy and a girl, bow and curtsy to each other.

"The Dawn of the Intellectual Life" depicts a scene of several young children around two tables set in the form of an L. They are each bending over a small weaving loom, threading yarn back and forth to weave a pattern. One child is standing. While she does have a small loom herself, she also appears to be

watching what her colleagues are doing, as if she is taking on a teacherly role for the moment. Both of these are very idyllic pictures. The children are all very neat and clean, and they are behaving in a very quiet, orderly manner. One gets the impression that very little is being said by these children and that they don't run around and make noise or messes. These scenes are quite typical for the time in which they appeared, owing much to sentimentality and to the adage that "children should be seen and not heard." Because of the age of these children, they are still learning things together -- both boys and girls. No differentiation is made according to gender.

However, this does not last long. The next stage that we see depicted occasionally is the public recitation of an essay. This may be done in the classroom, or for an audience of parents and other assembled guests. The latter is the scene in "That agonizing moment when little Mary reads her first school essay," a drawing printed on the pages of the November, 1910 issue of *Harper's Bazar*.

One of the most obvious things about this picture is the eyes of the people portrayed here. Mary is obviously wide-eyed with fear at the prospect of being up in front of all of these people. The audience members, too, though, have very wide eyes. Some of them seem happy and encouraging; others seem to be hanging on her every word and watching her so closely that they will notice everything about her. In many ways, they appear to us the way they probably appear to Mary: as a sea of faces all staring intently at her. There is only one figure that does not seem quite to fit with the rest of the people, neither in style of depiction nor in deportment. She is the young woman in the lower left corner. Rather than looking at Mary, she has turned her attention to us, and she gazes at us with calm, knowing eyes and a slight smile on her lips.

Is this the teacher? Perhaps. Her attitude implies, at least, that she has been through this type of experience before and that she knows that all concerned will get through this one, too. In some ways, although her dress and sleeves are as sketchy as the apparel of the other people depicted in the scene, her face seems more detailed or highlighted so as to convey a more immediate impression to the observer. In sharp contrast to this, Mary appears almost devoid of shading, so that she appears nearly flat and washed out. Indeed, one might say that the scene which the caption suggests is primary is really more of a backdrop to the woman in the foreground, whose attitude toward the event adds a sort of commentary to the scene. This makes a thought-provoking contrast to the images discussed at the outset of this study, where the man, or "Mr. World" was the more knowing character and the woman was foolish in her ambitions.

Of course, the older the girls become, the more their attention is directed toward more feminine pursuits. The illustrations by W.P. Snyder that accompanied an article on parish work at St. George's show women in a cooking class, an art class, and a "Girls' Friendly Society."

In similar fashion, girls are taught early, and by various means, about men. A 1905 illustration in *Life* shows four school girls "Going to School."

They are all looking at an older girl sitting on the park bench with her beau, and it is very apparent that they are taking in as much of that scene as possible. In a very real sense, the caption for this picture is a double-entendre. While the girls may very well be on their way to school, they are also "going to school" right there, with the older couple as their instructors. This is what they are to aspire to. This is the kind of behavior that they would wish for themselves in time.

The collegiate female continues these interests, as we have seen. Young and vivacious, ready to change the world, she is yet seen as somewhat inferior to her male counterparts. While women were not entering college in overwhelming numbers yet, by 1900 opportunities for women were such that higher education was a very real possibility for many, especially for those from prosperous families. Indeed, by 1906, that women attended college was an accepted fact, whether or not this was "approved of" by all. A cartoon in the *School Board Journal* that year showed a woman entering the gates of the University of Chicago and being met by a man identified as professor Zueblen and a woman labeled as "Free Love."

This cartoon shows that progress concerning women in higher education has been taking place, albeit slowly, in this country. Rather than indicting the young woman for wanting to attend the university, the cartoon is really lambasting Zueblen and his ideas, listed on a placard as "Our Doctrines: No marriage. Man is an animal. Woman is a dupe. Hurrah for Gorky!!!" The caption, "Another College Professor who talks too much," serves to reinforce this idea. The assumption is that the woman can go to school. The problem here is the teaching of this professor.

The collegiate experience includes sporting events and theatrical performances as well as academic studies. Some of these activities found their way into the pages of these periodicals, too. For example, the June 26, 1890 issue of *Life* ran a brief notice about a ball game between Princeton and Yale that ended in a tie. This was accompanied by an illustration of two girls in the stands.

They are blowing noisemakers and carrying a Princeton flag and seem genuinely pleased to be there, rooting for their team. The intriguing thing about this picture, though, is the element in the background. While these girls have their attention focused to the left of the sketch, there is a whole row of men placed behind them avidly watching something quite far away from the girls. In fact, the field that the men are watching appears to be at right angles to the one the girls are interested in. Two things might be inferred from this. First, the men may be placed there simply to give the impression of a crowd. Their presence signals that there are many people attending the game. Second, and more disturbing, the artist could be making a subtle comment here about women and their supposed lack of

understanding of sporting events. While we may wish that the former were the complete explanation, given the time in which this appeared, the latter may also be plausible.

No discussion of this subject would be complete without some mention of the image of the classroom teacher. The portrait of the spinster schoolmarm has been perpetuated over the years by a number of vehicles, not the least of which has been popular literature and mass media. Often the source of humor, she is stereotypically presented as a prudish, uncompromising keeper of morality and the "finer" elements civilization. Not surprisingly, this sort of image is not to be found in the educational periodicals of the day. Rather, the pictures there of "typical" school teachers are often of young women with books on their desks and a long stick in one hand, pointing to the blackboard or a bulletin board of some sort.

Because these illustrations are most often connected with advertisements, the women are inevitably smiling, obviously enjoying their place in front of the classroom.

The more traditional stereotype of the schoolmarm is found in the magazines intended for more general audiences, and almost invariably it is used in the context of humor. One brief example will serve the point.

A joke on the humor page of Harper's Bazar in March, 1910 reads,

Teacher: Now, Willie, tell us one of the principal events in Roman history, and mention the date.

Willie: Marc Antony went to Egypt 'cos he had a date with Cleopatra.

The illustration that accompanies this shows a very stereotypical school marm in a rather stereotypical classroom. The teacher is old. Her hair is pulled up in a bun, she wears a long skirt and a high collar, her nose is long, and she appears, well, somewhat crabby. With book in hand, she quizzes her pupil, a little boy wearing knickers and a large bow tie at the neck. Behind and around them are signs of other activity in the class. One student in the back is anxiously raising his hand, and another little girl is leaning forward to whisper the answer to Willie. At the blackboard stands a fourth child who is watching what is going on while writing a sum on the board. The teacher, who already appears quite tall due to her long, straight skirt, is made even moreso by being placed on a platform which elevates her above the level of the students and makes her stoop toward Willie as she asks her question. This is the image of the schoolmarm which we have come to associate with the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. It is a source of humor, of ridicule, and it is hardly flattering. It is notable, I think, that while this image is present in these publications, it is by no means the overriding image of women in education. There are many more college girls than old-fashioned schoolmarms in the pages of these magazines.

What, then, does all of this mean? What kind of conclusions can be drawn from these various images of females in education at the turn-of-the-century? To begin with, periodicals, by their very nature both reflect the tenor of the time and help to develop and perpetuate ideas. While there is a great deal of truth being expressed in some of these images - the growing acceptance of women attending college, the attitudes of some who find higher education to be useless for women in light of their traditional roles as wife and mother, the partnership of home and school in the rearing of children - there is also a great deal of myth-making going on in these periodicals, through the fiction and essays being published, through their use of advertisement, and through their use of illustration.

Both types of publications (general and educational) perpetuate myths. They aren't necessarily the same myths, however. For example, one would be hard-pressed to say that educational periodicals wanted to perpetuate the idea that a woman would only be happy as a wife and mother. Yet, they, like their less-specialized counterparts, still used imagery which glorified the woman in her position as guardian of the youth of the nation, and their portrayals of her are quite flattering. Likewise, they continued to reinforce the idea that a woman had a constitution that differed significantly from that of a man. Through advertisements and cartoons, her health and relative vanity are alluded to and accepted as such. There is always an air of innocence and often a sense of fragility which surrounds these women. Carol Ward, in *Myth America*, comments on this as well when she writes,

It is interesting to see that the image of the American woman does not change very much even when she goes to college. Higher learning does not take the stars out of her eyes. Playful and pretty as ever, a decoration and mascot, she remains the child-woman, innocent and unknowing.... Behind the sweet and simple face of the childlike female still lurked the suggestion of an inferior intelligence. It was an old idea: women were thought to have smaller and different brains from men. The idea persists in the girl-woman [of these sorts of illustrations], and although it conflicted with the reality of the woman who was taking her place as a mature and productive person in American life, it remained to shadow her entrance into the twentieth century(11).

As a woman, the educated female was not immune to the province of beauty. Indeed, school teachers and schoolgirls alike were aware of fashion and making themselves "presentable." Quite often, the women's magazines of the time included fashion pages devoted to the upcoming season's wardrobe for "schoolgirls and schoolboys" or the "college girl."

In their own way, these drawings, too, are myth-makers, for they perpetuate a concept of ideal beauty. As the ideas of fashion and the ideal shape of a woman's body changed, this was reflected in the fashion pages.

Just as these periodicals perpetuated ideas from the past, they also served to create new myths. The turn-of-the-century was a time of change for women, and education had something to do with it. By commenting on female education and presenting the idea over time, the image of the coed took shape. Such was also the case with the "new woman." As Lois Banner describes her in *American Beauty*,

the new woman included a variety of types drawn from the spectrum of the American class structure. She could be found among athletes, college students, reformers, and businesswomen. What characterized her was a new self-assertion and vigor and a new sensual behavior, a desire for pleasure that flew in the face of Victorian canons of duty and submissiveness. Throughout American society, women began to respond to new sensual themes expressed on the stage and in popular music and newspapers.(187)

This image of the new woman found general acceptance throughout society, and this is reinforced in the illustrations found in the publications of the day. Looking carefully, one notices an increase in the assertiveness of women, and their fashions become increasingly less-encumbering. One thinks of the "naturalness" of the Gibson Girl, for example, in noting the change.¹ The educational journals even picked up this change in attitude, as we have seen, by increasingly portraying women in the midst of public, political struggles. Indeed, this new type of woman was more easily accepted than the idea of women's suffrage, according to Banner. "Although men exhibited hostility to women's suffrage," she writes, "the majority of writers in the day's popular journals and newspapers were not hostile to women's education or to their participation in work and sports. By and large, men applauded the new woman" (244).

Overall, the adage "a picture's worth a thousand words" can be applied to the illustrations discussed here. In both overt and very subtle ways, they communicate messages to us of the ideas and attitudes, the truisms and myths, the realities and the dreams of our cultural past. The tapestry they present to us, depicting a brief slice of the history of women in the educational sphere, is varied and colorful. While there are elements that may disturb our current sensibilities, it is still a picture which acknowledges and affirms change for the betterment of society, and which looks to the future with hope.

¹ I have not dealt with the illustrations of Charles Dana Gibson much in this work primarily because, while they are indicative of some women of this time period, I chose to focus more on drawings which illustrated women in education, specifically, and his work rarely does that. More often, his illustrations deal with the activities and women of a particular social class.

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