

Shifting Gender Roles

Teacher Introduction:

The 20th century saw great changes within American society. With two World Wars, the Cold War, and social and political movements forcing change, the lives of men and women altered drastically. Wartime needs increased labor demands for both male and female workers, intensified domestic hardships and responsibilities, and increased pressures for Americans to conform to social and cultural norms. With these shifts in culture came shifts in ideas of gender within America, and soon the ways in which men and women look and act within their families, communities, and society began to change. *Regina O’Conner, the mother of Flannery, experienced such changes. When her husband passed away in 1941, she left her “homemaker” lifestyle to help her family run the farm, becoming manager of the property at one point to be the supporter of her child and herself. Her experience will reflect that of those discussed in this lesson.*

Though the fight for equal rights among the genders began before the Civil War, the turn of the century brought forth the climax of the women’s suffrage movement. Though disagreements over strategy threatened to ruin the movement more than once, on August 18, 1920, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified, enfranchising all American women and declaring that they deserve all the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. This was helped along by WWI, where women’s work on behalf of the war effort, activists pointed out, proved that they were just as patriotic and deserving of citizenship as men. For some, this work beyond the domestic sphere, and beyond the traditional boundaries of gender norms, continued on following the war.

As a result, when WWII approached, women working outside the home was not a foreign concept, but still considered non-traditional. However, when large portions of the U.S. male population went off to fight in the second world war, the demand to fill their previous jobs arose again for women. While conventional, unpaid “women’s work”—maintaining a household and raising children—was (and is) important and demanding, during the war years, white, middle-class women in the U.S. gained more independence and autonomy by entering the paid labor force. Likewise, women of color in the U.S., who had previously worked primarily on farms or as domestic workers, also found better paying and more highly skilled job opportunities. These changing gender dynamics for women at the time can be perfectly summed up by the iconic Rosie the Riveter.

The image of Rosie rolling up her sleeves in a strong, confident pose, exclaiming “We Can Do It!” represented the approximately 19 million women who began to work for a wage during the wartime. The federal government and these wartime industries claimed that these women were

essential to victory abroad, but their new positions at home created challenges towards the gender dynamic and sparked fear in some regarding the proper roles of women and men. For example, male coworkers often perceived the completion of physically demanding and skilled tasks by women as encroachment on “their” work and established gender norms, and some men responded with harassment and resistance towards their female counterparts. To counter this, the federal government and industrial leaders attempted to reassure a skeptical public and limit the potentially radical gender changes that women’s work posed by casting them as patriotic and necessary. They did so by separating male and female workers and paying women less wages. Even Rosie herself, though a symbol of women working outside the home, still maintained traditional femininity with her hair styled, nails manicured, and makeup done. Moreover, Rosie and the women she represented were only meant to be temporary, returning to their previous roles as housewives and mothers soon enough.

When the war ended, some women eagerly returned to domestic life, but even those who wanted or needed to continue working found their options severely limited. Men returned to claim their previous jobs, and women were pushed out of their higher paying positions back into the roles assigned to them during the prewar years.

Despite the push back, understanding of gender had expanded, remained firm, and transitioned by the war’s end. As the nation progressed into the 1950’s and 60’s, many women became determined to make their lives less restrained. With the next women’s movement, the sexual revolution, increased access to birth control, and the landmark Roe vs. Wade case in the 1970’s (which upheld on the grounds of privacy a woman’s constitutional right to end her pregnancy), women’s opportunities outside the domestic sphere increased and notions of equality began to open up. Though people reevaluated shifting gender roles in the 20th century in the context of their own experiences (which were shaped by race, class, region, religion, and a host of other factors), popular notions of gender began to crack, and the mold has been reshaped into the more modern constructions that we are still working to develop and understand today.

A Teacher’s Note on this Lesson:

This lesson hopes to encourage students to look at this time through the standards of the period and to understand the revolution in family/gender roles that took place during the 20th century, particularly WWII.

Social Studies Georgia Standards of Excellence:

Grade 5: **SS5H1** Describe how life changed in America at the turn of the century

Grade 5: **SS5H4** Explain America’s involvement in World War II.

- Describe the effects of rationing and the changing role of women and African Americans or Blacks; include “Rosie the Riveter” and the Tuskegee Airmen.

Grades 6-8: **L6-8RH2** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

Grades 6-8: **L6-8RH8** Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author’s point of view or purpose (e.g. loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts.)

Grades 6-8: **L6-8RH8** Distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text.

Lesson Objectives:

- Explore the fluid nature of gender roles that made daily life work during the 20th century.
- Understand the different stresses and sacrifices endured by men and women during WWII.
- Explore media influence during World War II.
- Analyze the portrayal of women during World War II.

Lesson Duration - One class period or one hour. *This can be modified to fit your class period length or divided across class periods or days.*

Lesson:

Begin the lesson by summarizing the information related in the teacher introduction above. Present it in whatever way is most comfortable for you and works best for your students.

1. Explain the concept of gender roles, which were the roles prescribed to a certain gender based on their perceived abilities and societal constraints. Emphasize the fact that gender roles have changed over time. (This video is a great visual aid in this conversation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ulh0DnFUGsk>)
 - a. What were gender roles during WWII and following the events? How did they change?
 - i. Show an image of Rosie the Riveter. Have the students analyze the image.
 - ii. Questions to consider: What does her outfit tell you about her lifestyle? What does the slogan mean?
 - b. Additional questions to consider: What gender roles are prevalent today? What are societies’ rules about roles for men and women? Encourage students to think about their parents or other adults in their lives to promote discussion.

Please note that in addition to the male and female genders, there is also non-binary and/or genderqueer. These are umbrella terms for gender identities that are neither male nor

female—identities that are outside the gender binary. Though the experiences expressed in this lesson are focused more on those who identified as male and female, those who identified as non-binary would have also experienced these shifting gender roles and more at the time, despite the lack of discussion or evidence surrounding such. Please express such notions when having this lesson with your students.

2. Media Exercise: Analyze 6 images of women who represent different aspects of the female experience leading up to, during, and following WWII. Then listen to the 1942 song “The Thing-Ummy-Bob (That’s Gonna Win the War).”
 - a. Use the questions below to promote discussion:
 - i. Images: Describe the woman in the photograph.
 1. Using clues in the photo, what do you think her life was like? What work was she engaged in?
 2. Now read the description of this woman. Were your inferences correct?
 3. How do you think gender roles were changed or enforced in this photograph?
 - ii. Song: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSS5ys_hBcrQ
 1. Who is the audience in this song?
 2. How does this song hope to encourage women to work?
 3. Although they are encouraging pride in the woman’s work, why do you think the “woman” in the song would use the word thing-ummy-bob to describe what she is making?
 4. How does this underscore the stereotype of women as silly, stupid, or childish?
 5. What does this tell you about the expectations of Americans in 1942?
 6. Would a song like this inspire you?
 3. Activity: Have the students create their own “Rosie the Riveter” poster.
 - a. Ask students to create a modern campaign or advertisement poster that encourages men, women, or non-binary individuals to engage in an activity or purchase an item. Have the students be creative! It can either relate to a passion of their own they want to show or it can break stereotypical gender norms and start a conversation. Invite them to present their posters to the class and to discuss why they chose the messages their posters represent.
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Rosie the Riveter:



Media Exercise:

Pre-WWII:



“Housewife canning, Dalworthington Gardens, Texas” - 1936

For many women whose occupation was to be a housewife, the kitchen was a key domestic sphere within their life. In addition to cooking and preparing the food for meals, they were also responsible for preparing preserves for the colder months of the year. The shelves behind her show that she had been quite productive in this process. Housewives spent most of their time within the home, while their husband went out to work and earn wages for the family.



“Women in various occupations” digital file from intermediary roll film copy. 1915-1920.

This drawing illustrates traditional employment or work options for women in the early 20th century. In the lower left corner, we see a mother with two children. Raising one’s children was considered one of the most important jobs that a woman could do for most of America’s early history. Stemming from this nature of being a caregiver came the occupation of nursing, which many women took up during war and can be seen in the center of the illustration. In addition to these, you see a woman cleaning in the back left and sewing in the bottom right, additional domestic, “womanly” duties that were common for a housewife and women at the time.

During WWII:



“Women shipfitters worked on board the USS NEREUS, and are shown as they neared completion of the floor in a part of the engine room. Left to right are Shipfitters Betty Pierce, Lola Thomas, Margaret Houston Thelma Mort and Katie Stanfill. US Navy Yard, Mare Island, CA.” c. 1943.

This image demonstrates the hard labor, industry jobs that women took over during the war when men went off to fight overseas. Notice the gentleman in the back, who likely oversees their work to ensure it is up to standards. Though he is mostly likely paid more than the women, their facial expressions (though staged for the photograph) also show contentment in their work. They are dressed very differently than the women in the images above, adorned in overalls and Rosie the Riveter style bandanas instead of dresses and heels. Margaret, the only African American woman in the photo, demonstrates the opportunities that opened up for people of color at this time as well. However, it is important to note that notions of racism and segregation still limited many African Americans and other people of color from opportunities equal to that of their white counterparts.



“Line up of some of women welders including the women's welding champion of Ingalls [Shipbuilding Corp., Pascagoula, MS].” 1943.

This is another example of women working industrial jobs while the men are away. Welding was not only a dirt and rough job, but was also quite dangerous. This would have been outside the traditional notions of what was acceptable for women to partake in prior to the war, however during this time of intense change, they stepped up to the plate. They are also in appropriate attire that allow for easy movement and support. Though also overseen by the man on the end, it is clear from his fedora hat and tie that he was not the one performing the hard labor; instead it was the women with their welding masks, work shoes, and coveralls who kept the line moving.

Post WWII:



“[Women taking the qualifying exam for the New York City police force] / World Telegram & Sun photo by Dick De Marsico.” 1947

Immediately following the war, there was a shift for many women to return to the traditional gender roles they held before. However, many women fought to maintain the sense of freedom they held during WWII. This image shows women who are back in traditional dresses or attire deemed appropriate for women, however they are taking an exam to work for the NYC Police Force. Considered a serious and important job, these women are breaking away from the gender norms at the time.



“Ms. [Magazine] staff meeting in June 1972. From left: Letty Cottin Pogrebin, Gloria Steinem, Margaret Sloan-Hunter, Suzanne Levine, Mary Thom, Harriet Lyons, Patricia Carbine, and Ruth Sullivan.” 1972.

Ms. Magazine is an American feminist magazine co-founded in 1972 by feminist and social/political activist Gloria Steinem and feminist and child welfare advocate Dorothy Pitman Hughes. It was the first national American feminist magazine, and the women in this image not only worked for it, but were major players in the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 70s. Their attire and occupation are unlike the generations before, but they were part of the overarching trend in the 20th century of shifting gender roles and breaking stereotypes.