Shifting Gender Roles

Teacher Introduction:

Antebellum America was largely divided, with the North primarily a manufacturing hub and the South almost completely devoted to agriculture. This meant that as the war started, the North had to grow more of its own food while the South suddenly had to quickly diversify. This was especially important since Southern ports were quickly blockaded by Northern ships, making trade with foreign nations impossible. At the start of the war, the Union’s undeveloped land was put to use through agriculture. The Homestead Act, passed in 1862, provided free land to anyone willing to cultivate it. Virgin soil and excellent weather produced a surplus of goods that were sold to Europe for additional funds for the war effort.

Wartime affected the South differently. The South faced poor infrastructure and a lack of transportation, to move what little they did have, made life hard for many Southern families. Food prices soared and many families were encouraged, by the Confederate government, to plant foodstuff in their farms rather than tobacco and cotton.

Wartime required many men to be away from their homes and regular jobs, women often stepped up to fill the breach. They were now required to perform roles in their homes and out in society that had previously only been done by men. Gender roles that had once felt set in stone were now being tested and blurred through wartime necessity.

The sexes as well as the races were extremely segregated in the antebellum world, especially in the Southern states. There was a clear hierarchy in the South, with the white male at the head, his wife and children below him, his hired help below them, with the freeman and slave at the very bottom. Each plantation home was its own community, so unlike the North, where society was a bit more integrated, each white man was his own king in the community he created for himself. Each member of the Southern community had a prescribed role that was executed without much cross over. White women did not work outside the home and largely existed in the domestic sphere. The Civil War necessitated that this change.

The Northern states had a complex economy that was based on multiple industries including farming, manufacturing, and shipping. The North, when compared to the South, was an urbanized place that had an emerging middle class, which gave more possibility for upward mobility than the stratified South. The social strata in the North also contained an immigrant population that by this time was coming into the United States in waves. Urbanization necessitated a different life and it was not uncommon for men and sometimes women to work outside of the domestic sphere. During the Civil War production was an important part of the war effort and factories had to continue to churn out goods. During the war, some men
helped the war effort by remaining in their jobs. Many women also came out of the domestic sphere and were essential to production in the North. They occupied jobs that had previously been taken only by men.

Slavery propped up the economy of the South and because white men were not needed in the fields, they were able to fight. Due to a large African American work force potentially all white men of a certain age were available to fight. When they left home, this created a world of mostly white women, children, and slaves. At this time white women were educated in the knowledge that they were inferior to white men and therefore believed that they did not have the strength necessary to control a large slave population or run a farm. Some women rose to this challenge while many found it arduous and troublesome and could not cope with new responsibilities.

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 roles that took place during the Civil War. It uses pictures of real or reproduction items from the 19th century that were associated with different aspects of life during this period. All the pictures of the items mentioned in this lesson are included at the end.

Georgia State Social Studies Standards

Grade 8: SS8H5 Analyze the impact of the Civil War on Georgia.

L6-8RH1 Cite Specific Textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources
L6-8RH2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary of secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.
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.)
L6-8RH8 Distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text.

Grade 9: SSUSH9 Evaluate key events, issues, and individuals related to the Civil War

Lesson Objectives

- Explore the fluid nature of gender roles required to make daily life work during the Civil War
- Explore items used by men and women during the Civil War
- Analyze the portrayal of women during the Civil War.
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.

Object pictures: Seeds, Housewife, trousers, darning egg, cast iron pan, shackles, whip, cotton, farmer’s almanac, and shuttle

1. Lay out objects pictures associated with this lesson. Have your students look at the assembled objects and ask the class the following questions:
   
   A. From these objects, what would you think was expected of women and men during this time period?
   
   B. Explain the concept of gender roles – the roles that were prescribed to a certain gender based on their perceived abilities and societal constraints. Emphasize the fact that gender roles have changed over time. How were gender roles different in the North vs. the South?

   C. What gender roles are prevalent today? What are societies’ rules about roles for men and women? Encourage students to think about their parents or others adults in their life to promote discussion.

2. Gendered Objects: Have the students break into groups, each taking one or two a object pictures with them. Have them describe how these they believe these gendered objects changed from before the war to after. Please pass out a “gendered objects worksheet” for each student group. After the students have had a few minutes to discuss each piece have them present their findings to the class. A key for teachers is listed in the teacher answer section. Review the answers together.

3. Photo exercise: This can be done as a whole class, small group, or individually. Show students six photos of women who represent different aspects of the female experience during the Civil War. Use the questions below to promote discussion as a class or pass out copies for students to answer alone or in small groups:

   A. Describe the woman in the photograph.
   
   B. Do you notice any objects from the trunk in this photo?
   
   C. Using clues in the photo, what do you think her life was like?
   
   D. Now read the description of this woman, were your inferences correct?
   
   E. Knowing what you do now about her life, do you notice anything you didn’t before?
   
   F. How do you think gender roles were changed or enforced in this photograph?
Gendered Objects Worksheet

Describe the object you have, the physical characterizes of it:

What do you think this object is or was used for?

Who do you think (men or women) would have primarily used this object before The Civil War? Why?

Who do you think (men or women) would have primarily used this during or after The Civil War? Why?

Why do you think it was necessary for a gender switch to be made concerning your object?

Is there any object you use today that is similar to the object you have? Has the use of it changed? If so, how?

If you don’t know of an object similar to the one you have, why don’t we need or use something similar to it anymore?
Gendered Objects Key

- **Seeds** – This is an object that is usually associated with male occupations. Though men did most of the planting and harvesting, women also participated as well. In poorer families, families that could not afford slave labor, women were expected to be in the fields alongside their husbands, often with their children, to get the harvest in. Vegetable gardens were often considered to be in the domestic arena and were often maintained by females. In addition, slave field hands were often women. Slave women did not enjoy the gender distinctions and protections that came with these distinctions that their white sisters did.

- **Cotton** – The same nuances that farming equipment requires, so does cotton. Though this cash crop is more firmly in the hands of male work, poorer women and female slaves would play a part in harvesting this as well.

- **Whip** – This was a device used for punishment in the South. Before the war, an overseer, usually a white male, was designated to keep the slave population of a given farm productive and under check. When white males were drafted, white females became in charge of the slave population. Many females did not feel up to the task of using this device to discipline their slave population, others felt comfortable using this device.

- **Shackles** – Shackles were used to contain both male and female slaves. They could be used as a containment mechanism or as a punishment for perceived wrong doing. This is a gender neutral piece.

- **Housewife** – This is the name for a small sewing kit usually made by the female relations of a soldier and used by the soldier to repair his clothes. Before the war, sewing and mending was strictly a female occupation. Many women continued to make clothing for their loved ones at the front, but often could not continue to mend the clothing of their loved one. The housewife represents female occupation that crossed over and is now an acceptable job for a male. The name “housewife” does make femininity into an object form, something that is definable by objects. Though the Housewife is solely used by men, it is a highly charged gendered object.

- **Darning egg** – This is a darning tool that was used by women before the war. Just like the housewife, this piece changes gender roles during the war. Though they were still used at home by women, a soldier might have a darning egg to repair his holey socks.

- **Shuttle** – This piece is largely a female tool before and during the war. Before the war, this object was largely a lower-class female object. Weaving has been considered a female occupation for hundreds of years. In the North, factories full of women continued to weave throughout the war. Due to the blockade on Southern ports, the influx of fabrics quickly dried out. Homespun, or cloth made on the southern farm or plantation, was relied on in the past to construct the clothing slaves and the very poor would need throughout the year. This clothing was spun and woven by a skilled female slave. Due to the lack of fashionable fabrics, many white women took to wearing homespun and a few wove the fabric themselves.

- **Cast iron pan** – This pan is an object that before the war was used almost exclusively by women for cooking. In richer homes, it was used by a servant or slave, and in homes that
could not afford a cook, it was used by the woman of the house or her
daughters. Though women continued to cook throughout the Civil War, soldiers often had to
cook their own food. Both Union and Confederate troops were given rations of food and were
expected to make dishes out of these goods. Though many men would not have something as
nice as a frying pan, this represents the cooking these soldiers would have done during the
war.

• **Trousers** – Pants are largely a male gendered object at this time. During the war, many women
were tempted do wear trousers as they went about the heavy lifting that comes with farm
work. Sarah Morgan of Louisiana stated to her diary in the summer of 1862 that she almost put
on her absent brother’s pants. “I advanced so far as to lay it on the bed…my courage deserted
me, and there ended my first and last attempt at disguise. I have heard of so many girls boast of
having warm men’s clothes; I wonder where they get the courage.” – *Mothers of Invention*
(220). Though a few women disguised themselves as men, wearing men’s clothing, to fight in
the war. Many women did alter their clothing, even if they didn’t go to the extreme of wearing
men’s clothing. Women were often forced to forgo the large cage crinoline or hoops that were
in fashion. It was much easier to go about chores without the large hoop holding them back.

• **Farmer’s Almanac** – “by definition, records and predicts astronomical events, tides,
weather, and other phenomena with respect to time.” Tending to the farm and ruling
over the slaves in the field was predominately a man’s job before the Civil War. During
the Civil War since many men had to leave their farms to fight, women took over their
role. The Farmer’s Almanac is a representation of tending to a farm.
Photo Exercise Exhibit (B.)
Photo Exercise Exhibit (C.)
Photo Exercise Exhibit (E.)
Photo Exercise Exhibit (F.)
Women of the Civil War: Photo Exercise
Handout/Key

A. This Harper’s Weekly Magazine illustration shows women working outside of the home replacing a job that had formally only been performed by men. Many women worked for the first time outside of the home in the south during this period. Working outside of the home was an accepted practice in the north. However, in the south traditional ‘women’s positions in the north like teaching and nursing were still performed by men. During the war many women worked for the first time outside of the home. After the war many things changed, women who had grown during the Civil War would demand more liberties, including the right to vote. – picture on page 17

B. This is a photo of Kady Brownell who was one of 250 women to fight in the Civil War. Unlike many women who disguised themselves as soldiers, Ms. Brownell did not disguise the fact that she was a woman and served under her own name. She and her husband both were part of the Fifth Rhode Island Infantry. Throughout the war she was a sharpshooter, a regiment flag carrier, and a nurse. She retired from military service when her husband was wounded. Ms. Brownell shows the shifting perceptions of women during this period. After the war, women who had worked outside the home and housewives, all of whom had been forced to take on more responsibility were not able to return to antebellum gender distinctions.

C. Clara Barton – Ms. Barton, known as the “angel of the battlefield” was a Civil War nurse who would go on to found the American Red Cross. Ms. Barton began to participate in the war effort by collecting bandages, food, and clothing from Ladies Aid Societies. She transported these goods to the front lines to provide relief for soldiers. Clara Barton worked on the front lines and would be put in charge of several Union hospitals. After the war Clara Barton did not quietly go back to the domestic sphere she lectured around the country about her experience during the war. Her humanitarian influences would found the American Red Cross in 1881.

D. This stereograph card is entitled “Tent Life of the 31 Pennsylvania Regiment.” Stereograph cards were cards that appeared as 3-D images when viewed through a device. These cards were popular in the 19th century, which means that this is an image contemporaries of the Civil War would have been interested in. The card depicts a woman holding a basket with a man next to her holding a saw. A girl and two young children are shown to the right of the man. Some women refused to be separated from their husbands and traveled with the army, keeping house or tent for their solider husband. In this instance, traditional gender roles were preserved with the woman tending to the needs of her family and dwelling while her husband concentrated on soldiering.

E. Mary Tippee was with the 114th Pennsylvania Zouave regiment. Zouaves were both Union and Confederate regiments who adopted the North African style of dress that usually consisted of short open jackets, baggy trousers called serouels, sashes, and oriental headgear. Mary was a vivandere, a role that meant she was a nurse, cook, seamstress, and laundress who was part of the Zouave
regiment. Mary went beyond the usual vivandere role; these women were usually sent away from the battlefield. She fought in thirteen separate battles and was wounded in the ankle by a bullet at the battle of Fredericksburg and received the Kearny Cross for gallantry – it is visible in this photo. Mary is also considered to be the only woman who fought in the battle of Gettysburg, she used the canteen pictured to take water and spirits to the men in the field. In this photo she wears the Zouave uniform with a calf-length skirt over her trousers.

http://www.archives.gov/research/military/civil-war/photos/

F. This ambrotype depicts Lucretia Electa and Louise Ellen Crossett, sisters who worked at a Lawrence, Massachusetts mill. The two sisters are wearing identical outfits, down to their jewelry. They both have weaving shuttles and Lucretia carries scissors on her skirt. These tools of their trade show that these were two working women who were proud of their employment. It was much more common for northern women to work outside the home than their southern counterparts. This photo was taken September 26, 1859, before the Civil War. It was the presence of factories, like the one that the Crossett sisters worked in that would set the North apart from the South during the great war.

G. This illustration is entitled “Our Watering Places – The Empty Sleeve at Newport,” by Winslow Homer originally pictured in Harper’s Weekly Magazine in 1865. A stylish young woman drives a phaeton (type of carriage) next to a veteran with a missing arm. Due to his injury and the tides of war, she is the one in charge while he is the dependent one. The gender roles have surely switched in this illustration.
Farmer's Almanac, For the Year 1862.

MANSFIELD, OHIO:
PUBLISHED BY STURGES & PRITCHARD,
BOOKSELLERS AND STATIONERS.
A housewife
Cast Iron Skillet
Cotton Boll
Darning Eggs
Wrist or Ankle Iron Shackles
Weaving Shuttles
Confederate Soldier Trousers
Leather Whip
Various Seeds