Theodore Roosevelt's prescriptions for the education of women reflected the growing anxiety entertained by middle class Protestant men early in the twentieth century over the proper place of women and the appropriate relationship between the sexes. Women must be taught, in schools and homes, through art and literature, that the perpetuation of America's moral character was largely their responsibility. They could act out their innate knowledge of order at home and in the nation, militating against chaos and anarchic aggression; they would restore America to the strong moral nation he imagined it had been in a simpler past.

ELAINE LESLAU SILVERMAN*

Theodore Roosevelt and the Education of Women

When Theodore Roosevelt became president of the United States in 1901, the country was in the midst of an extended debate over the proper place of women and the appropriate relationship between the sexes. The intense, sometimes hopeful, often frightened discussions had begun with the first women's rights conference in New York in 1848 at which the women who attended had formulated a Women's Declaration of Independence, extending the founding fathers' hopes for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to the other half of the population. Theodore Roosevelt grew up in a period during the second half of the 19th century in which the debate narrowed from abstract rights of women to the search for a definition of those rights. Women's suffrage, women's work, female education, limitation of family size, divorce — all these issues remained far from resolved and hotly debated throughout the 19th century. Roosevelt, always wanting to be aware of what the population was thinking and doing, not only informed himself on these issues, but often directly addressed himself to all of them. The Woman Question became the central concern of his period, and he made it his own as well.

Throughout his life, in a remarkable outpouring of feelings, he conveyed his conceptions of human nature and the central moral conflicts of his time with an openness, an urgency, rarely matched by any other president. Whether speaking before an audience, writing for a journal, or preparing a book, he was always conscious of his role as moral leader of the American people and spokesman for their conscience. He wrote on a great variety of subjects, from the homeliest to the loftiest, always teaching, always urging, always exhorting the citizens. He defined their mixed feelings; he helped to lessen their confusion by his own resolution. Always the teacher himself, he quite naturally turned his attention to the subject of education for women. What kind of education? he was to ask; and for whom? For what purpose? His answers to those questions illuminated the centrality of the Woman Question early in the 20th century, and exposed also a particular definition of men's and women's roles.

Roosevelt's conception of women's education bears close examination, for it elucidates the way men and women fit into his vision of the future, based on his nostalgic understanding of the past and on his construction of the demands of the present. It must first be understood that people like Theodore Roosevelt, white, Protestant, upper-middle class, urban or rural, felt themselves assaulted and threatened. They felt, consciously or unconsciously, wrongly or rightly, that, in their youth, the mythic golden age of their childhoods, men like themselves and their fathers had

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wielded incontrovertible power in towns and small cities. In their nostalgic image of the golden past, men, their fathers, had been powerful and women had been moral. Now politics and society were rapidly and frighteningly changing. The great new industrialists were altering the American economic system. The American social structure was being transformed by masses of European immigrants introducing a variety of cultures. New philosophical arguments were undercutting traditional morality. The world was chaotic; anarchy seemed to threaten. Anarchy meant, for men like Roosevelt, the introduction of a frightening multiplicity of new influences. Order must be reimposed. Men and women together must work to restore the world in which men sharing Roosevelt's notions of character and duty laboured for the good of others and the perpetuation of their own power. The schools and colleges must be reminded that their duty was to help retain that world of safety and comfort. When Roosevelt addressed himself to the question of education for women, he evoked a panoply of images of the right kind of world.

That world for him, the virtuous and moral future he envisioned, was sexually polarised.[1] He divided the world into masculine and feminine elements — aggressiveness, license, and independence on the one hand; submissiveness, order, and dependence on the other. An excess of one needed the balance of the other. The potential chaos of masculinity demanded the re-introduction of feminine order and discipline in the nation as he had known them in his own family. The qualities he thought innate to women would keep America from deteriorating into a welter of conflicting ambitions and degrading heterogeneity. While Roosevelt was throughout his life fascinated with explicitly masculine heroes like cowboys, hunters, and soldiers — men on their own, men without women, the mythical loners who represented the best and most virile Americans in their independence — he also recognised that the nation needed strong institutions as cohesive forces in the national interest. The strongest of them, the family, writ large in the state, would enable the country to resist the primitive impulses which Roosevelt sensed in himself and ascribed to other men. The aggression — discipline dichotomy, the male-female polarity, would best be reconciled by working to effect a return to his family's standards. He attempted to reproduce the familial pattern in the world at large; order must overcome the shattering potential of democratic individualism. Since women represented order, men disorder, women would hold together American society. The unbearable tensions and divisions in American society might yet be resolved.

The majority of citizens must be united in a patriotic scheme by knowledge of social responsibility and duty. As a politician, Roosevelt would take part in the education of Americans, for politics was didactic; the presidency offered by the "bully pulpit" from which to preach the virtues of Anglo-Saxon family hierarchy as a formulation of the middle class ethic. As the men and women in the late 19th century faced a bewildering and conflicting array of roles forced upon them by a newly industrialised society arising from the ashes of the Civil War, Roosevelt and men like him knew that national unity demanded obedience. Schoolteachers, artists, poets, and novelists as well as national leaders should teach communal responsibility — fidelity to middle class ethics of order — to the American people both old and new.

Women knew best of all what duty meant; for them, it meant childbearing, even if it killed them, as it often did. They were capable of sustaining the burden of Victorian society, for they knew that their responsibility was to future generations which must be white, Anglo-Saxon, and Christian. Women were capable of their task because the

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[1]For a more complete explication of this theme, see Eliane Leslau Silverman, "Theodore Roosevelt and Women: The Inner Conflict of a President and Its Impact on His Ideology." Diss. University of California at Los Angeles, 1973.

qualities innate to their sex were sweetness, gentleness, unselfishness, tenderness, and the strength to endure.[2] The "best women," wrote Roosevelt, offered the surest means of resisting the "unhealthy softening" of materialism in the nation as well as in the family.[3] Women, at the heart of family life, were responsible for maintaining the "old truths": that the primary duty of the husband was to be the home-maker and the bread-winner for his wife and children, while the woman's responsibility was to be "the helpmeet, the housewife, and mother."

> The woman should have ample educational advantages; but save in exceptional cases the man must be, and she need not be, and generally ought not to be, trained for a lifelong career as the family breadwinner, and therefore, after a certain point the training of the two must normally be different because the duties of the two are normally different. This does not mean inequality of function, but it does mean that normally there must be dissimilarity of function. On the whole, I think the duty of the woman the more important, the more difficult, and the more honorable of the two; on the whole I respect the woman who does her duty even more than I respect the man who does his.[4]

The education of women must therefore be directed at maintaining those old truths, truths deeply and painfully restrictive for the 20th century, but totally meaningful for Roosevelt. Effective education, he thought, was a means of assuring that women and men would fulfill their obligations. The success of the nation depended on its citizens. "The public schools are the nurseries from which spring the future masters of the commonwealth . . . "[5] Men and women both must learn early their appropriate roles essential to maintaining the distinctiveness of the middle class.

> Our aim must be the healthy economic interdependence of the sexes, based on equality of rights and of obligations, including the obligation of sexual and domestic morality; any attempt to bring about the kind of economic independence, which means a false identity of economic function spells mere ruin. The home, based on the love of one man for one woman and the performance in common of their duty to their children, is the finest product of Christianity and civilization. Our consistent effort must be to strengthen it, and any movement to destroy it marks the nadir of folly and wickedness.[6]

Christianity and civilisation themselves were at stake, and women would rescue them, if properly taught.

Education for women must be understood more broadly than merely learning in the schools. It included also the didactic functions of art and literature. These, in turn, placed in sharp relief the crucial teaching of girls and young women in the home. During his childhood, Roosevelt learned that the basis of good citizenship lay in the home; he continued always to believe it as an undebatable truth. Good government and a virtuous society were impossible unless citizens understood that, for political morality depended on knowledge of domestic duty. At home, Americans first learned cleanliness, respect between husbands and wives, the need for performance of duty, and the means of educating children.[7] He told a writer for the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1906 that, as the state was but an aggregate of families, so the condition of the state was a reflection of the conditions existing in families. The state desperately needed the qualities engendered within the family: "authority, obedience, and the idea of social interdependence."[8] Reflecting his own need for a balance between men and women,

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[2]2 November 1910, speech at Goucher College, Baltimore, Maryland, p. 9, Speech File, Theodore Roosevelt Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Hereafter cited as TR LC.

[3]TR to Harriet Stanton Blatch, 15 April 1918, TR LC.

[4]TR, *American Problems*, 1912, in Hermann Hagedorn (ed.), *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, Vol. 16 (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1926), p. 165. Hereafter cited as *Works*.

[5]TR, *American Ideals*, 1897, in *Works*, Vol. 13, p. 274.

[6]TR, *American Problems*, 1912, in *Works*, Vol. 16, p. 216.

[7]24 October 1905, speech at Montgomery, Alabama, p. 2, Speech File 5A, TR LC.

[8]TR, "Mr. Roosevelt's Great Interest in Neglected Children," *Ladies Home Journal*, November 1906, p. 19.

Roosevelt saw marriage as its fulcrum. Without marriage, the equilibrium between masculine individualism and feminine obedience would not be achieved. He mirrored the 19th century view of marriage as a contract shaping, not only the lives of the two individuals involved, but the future of the entire country. In 1900, he wrote that "when men fear work or fear righteous war, when women fear motherhood, they tremble on the brink of doom . . ."[9] A good marriage was one whose partners best served the state of self-consciously recognising their necessary contribution to the nation. Men provided for the home, but women gave it meaning and morality. Marriage was so vital to the country that Roosevelt suggested in his 1906 report on the state of the union the desirability of a constitutional amendment to empower Congress to deal with marriage, divorce and polygamy.[10]

Rape and prostitution were the worst crimes against family life.[11] The solution to the problem of prostitution lay, thought Roosevelt, in raising the level of individual morality. One means to achieve this was by lowering the age of marriage. "The women who preach late marriages," he wrote in his autobiography, "are by just so much making it difficult to better the standard of chastity." He feared that, increasingly, some people were avoiding the responsibilities of marriage. He had great contempt for them and feared that liberalised divorce laws would mean social disintegration. Marriage had social sanctification; divorce for personal gratification was selfish.[12] The growing divorce rate meant that "there is something rotten in the community . . . "[13] The evil could only be checked by reforming the family.[14] Knowledge of duty must be reinforced by an even tighter family circle, wherein authority was thoroughly obeyed. His argument was a circular one: divorce was an evil instigated by the disintegrated family and an unwholesome atmosphere; check divorce by making family life wholesome and unified. When addressing the National Congress of Mothers in 1905, he defined divorce as

> a bane to any nation, a curse to society, a menace to the home, an incitement to marriage unhappiness, and to immorality, an evil thing for men, and a still more hideous evil for women.[15]

He argued that even unpleasant marriages should be continued, however difficult for the husband and wife, for surmounting difficulty was of great value. Duty came first. One must endure. The schools must enforce that lesson.

The reason for marriage was to have children. The right way for women was early marriage and at least four children; these together provided little opportunity for women to enter other roles. Frequent pregnancy and childbearing were often debilitating, sometimes fatal. In the period when exercise was not recommended and nutrition not yet a science, women felt tired and drained much of the time.[16] In urging larger families, Roosevelt was implicitly sentencing women to a life of chronic exhaustion. He made large families seem a positive virtue, a benefit for the nation, for, by painting constant pregnancies in a glorious light, he pre-empted women's search for

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[9]TR, *The Strenuous Life*, 1900, in *Works*, Vol. 13, pp. 320-321.

[10]TR, *State Papers as Governor and President*, 1906, in *Works*, Vol. 15, p. 377.

[11]TR, *Autobiography*, 1913, in *Works*, Vol. 20, pp. 299-300 *passim* and p. 203.

[12]TR, "The President's Views on a Uniform Divorce Law," *Ladies Homes Journal*, September 1906, p. 17.

[13]TR, *Realizable Ideals*, 1912, in *Works*, Vol 13, p. 631.

[14]TR, "The President's Views on a Uniform Divorce Law," *Ladies Home Journal*, September 1906, p. 17.

[15]TR, *American Problems*, 1912, in *Works*, Vol. 16, p. 169.

[16]For contemporary insights into women's ill health, see Catherine Beecher, "Statistics of Female Health," 1871, in Gail Parker (Ed.), *The Oven Birds* (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), pp. 165-178 *passim*.

some escape from weariness. Women had to be made to understand that their traditional roles, exhausting though they were, limited as they might be, were greatly preferable to and far more meaningful than the new possibilities that were being suggested to them. He wanted women taught that many successes were worth having, but the best success was a houseful of children.[17] He had heard that the president of a women's college advocated a lower birth rate, in order that fewer children be better brought up. He found this a "mean and selfish wickedness," because a family with only one or two children meant what he called race suicide.[18] Women with many children would save the race.

Roosevelt shared his contemporaries' fear that the world was being overpopulated by inferior nationalities, while the superior race dwindled in numbers and forcefulness. Like many others, he noticed that two-thirds of the population's increase, as recorded in the 1910 census, derived from immigration, "not from young Americans who are to perpetuate the blood and tradition of the old stock."[19] A year later, he wrote that "the American stock is being cursed with the curse of sterility," and that sterility was due to moral and not physiological defects, "to coldness, to selfishness, to love of ease, to shrinking from risk . . . "[20] Procreation became a social virtue, an overwhelming benefit for the nation. In the hope that women would accept the role he assigned them, he made childbearing the supreme virtue. If isolated from struggle and immersed in prosperity, Americans would become "genuinely effete" and lose "that moral spring."[21] Moral spring and masculinity derived from a society in which women's and men's roles were dissimilar, in which men assessed their aggressive maleness in distinction to the socialised femaleness of their wives, and in which women assessed their contribution to the nation by the quantity of their offspring. So long as this was the measure of women's worth, any other contributions they might conceivably make would be severely limited by the demands of physiology, if nothing else. The closed-off possibilities were justified in the national interest, and in the interest of the Anglo-Saxon race and the middle class.

Women, then, must be educated to their role, to their dissimilarity of function.

> Professors of eugenics . . . should remember that all efforts to educate the race necessarily amount to nothing if there be no race to educate. There is no use in educating a woman for motherhood unless she is educated to be a mother . . . Let professors of eugenics turn their attention to making it plain to the average college graduates of either sex . . . that it is their prime duty to the race to leave their seed after them to inherit the earth.[22]

Above all, education must not unfit women for their primary work. When addressing students at a girls' school in 1910, he noted with pleasure that the curriculum provided training in housework, adding immeasurable benefits to a merely intellectual training.[23] That same year, he told the women at Goucher College that, if college unfit women to be wives and mothers, it had harmed them. He acknowledged that educated women could be valuable to their husbands and children, and held in contempt the notion that cultivated women were less fit for the home; really, he said, they were "as delightful in their own families as cultivated men . . . " A woman could

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[17]TR, *Autobiography*, 1913, in *Works*, Vol. 20, p. 327.

[18]TR, *Foes of Our Own Household*, 1917, in *Works*, Vol. 19, p. 143.

[19]TR, *Public Papers* (Albany: Brandow Printing Co., 1899-1900), p. 52

[20]TR, *Literary Essays*, 1911, in *Works*, Vol. 12, p. 187.

[21]TR to Cecil Spring Rice, 5 August 1896, Series 4A, Box 1, TR LC.

[22]TR, *Literary Essays*, 1911, in *Works*, Vol. 12, pp. 203-204.

[23]28 March 1910, speech at American Girls College, Cairo, Egypt, Speech File 5A, TR LC.

hardly be too learned, as long as she knew something besides books. Formal learning did not give her the right to ignore her other duties; it was no substitute for women's real work.[24] Three years later, he wrote in a similar vein that women's colleges like Smith and Bryn Mawr must teach that beauty, which he apparently thought was part of the school curriculum, could not be enjoyed unless it were paid for by useful work. Educational systems should not turn out women unwilling to make social contributions.[25] So long as women's educational institutions produced students ready to take on their true role, he would continue to praise them. In 1917, he wrote again that women had as much right to schooling as men, and that education was not unwomanly.[26] If the schools and colleges reinforced Roosevelt's dearest desire to return the United States to the kind of order he thought he had known in his childhod, he would approve them wholeheartedly. They must never subvert men's urge to protect and defend home and country and women's desire to nurture children.

He also approved literature as a source of moral education when it taught a worthy standard of behaviour, a middle class standard. He trusted himself, his family and his friends to read all sorts of books, but had little confidence that the majority of Americans, especially immigrants, were discerning enough to be allowed to read the literature he considered pernicious. For the masses, good books were necessary; a healthy reading programme would further American virtues. Books must teach the proper relationship between the sexes, replete with Anglo-Saxon restraints and American gentility in courtship and married life. Roosevelt despised a book by the French novelist Alphonse Daudet which alluded to the "fear of maternity, the haunting terror of the young wife of the present day." He commented that, "when such words can be truthfully written of a nation, that nation is rotten to the heart's core."[27] Tolstoy was "an exceedingly unsafe moral adviser" who had proven himself "a sexual and a moral pervert" in *The Kreutzer Sonata,* which was "as unhealthy a book as vicious in its teaching to the young, as . . . any other piece of pornographic literature . . . "[28] On the other hand, Owen Wister's *Lady Baltimore* was admirable, protesting as it did "against brutal greed and sensuality and vacuity; it teaches admiration of manliness and womanliness . . . "[29] To his female audience, he often recommended Kathleen Norris' *Mother,* whose heroine resisted the glamour of the city life and returned to the rural, though improverished, happiness of her mother, who had raised eight children.[30]

As telling were his comments on art, which also served a didactic function; art must subtly convey American values. He intensely disliked Reubens, for example, whom he thought a "fleshly, sensuous painter" whose female figures were "ludicrous or ugly when meant to represent either the Virgin or a Saint . . . "[31] Apparently, only the Anglo-Saxon female form could convey the appropriately ascetic and pure divinity; art as a moralising form must intensify the other teachings so important to Roosevelt and many of his contemporaries.

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[24]2 November 1910, speech at Goucher College, Baltimore, Maryland, p. 8, Speech File, TR LC.

[25]TR, "The High School and the College," *Outlook,* 104 (10 May 1913), 66-68 *passim.*

[26]TR, *Literary Essays,* 1913, in *Works,* Vol. 12, p. 212; and TR, *Foes of Our Own Household,* 1917, in *Works,* Vol. 19, p. 143.

[27]TR, *The Strenuous Life,* 1900, in *Works,* Vol. 13, p. 321.

[28]TR to Laurence Abbott, 21 October 1909, pp. 1-2 P618, TR LC.

[29]Owen Wister, *Roosevelt: The Story of a Friendship* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1930), p. 248.

[30]TR, *Autobiography,* 1913, in *Works,* Vol. 20, pp. 168 and 18.

[31]Corinne Roosevelt Robinson, *My Brother, Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1922), p. 117.

Sensuality, greed, even ugliness and tragedy, were not useful to a generation so self-conscious, so race-conscious, of their necessary contribution to the future. From literature and art, as well as from the schools and from the family, Americans must learn Roosevelt's morality. The middle class, Anglo-Saxon and Christian, were set apart by their superior morality; yet they feared their isolation, fearing loss of their influence. They needed to intensify their apartness and yet convey their ideals to the new people who were bewildering and frightening them. Only thus did they think they could retain their traditional power, maintaining their values and teaching them to others. Were the mass of Americans to learn to submit chaos to order as Roosevelt had done, he could trust that America in the future would be the strong moral nation he imagined it had been in a simpler past.