

Amanda Krause

Professor Noble

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### The Veil of True Womanhood:

#### The Cult of True Womanhood and its Effect on Intimacy in Nineteenth Century America

Intimacy is empowering. Being seen as a complete, nuanced individual by another promotes a sense of self worth and agency. Steen Halling says in *Intimacy, Transcendence, and Psychology* that the experience of, “being understood by another person...takes us beyond the realization that ‘at least one person understands me’ to an affirmation of oneself as a member of the human community” (22). But some women in nineteenth century America lost the opportunity to be fully understood, and subsequently lost the opportunity to experience the empowering effects of intimacy, because of their confinement in the cult of True Womanhood. True Womanhood was a nineteenth-century social construction that defined a woman’s life according to four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity (Welter 44). Modern criticisms of the cult of True Womanhood focus on the ways the Victorian concept worked to suppress women in society, but what is neglected is the effect that the suppression of women had on intimacy. True intimacy requires honesty and the ability to see another with full subjectivity, but True Womanhood acted as a legal and social veil, stifling honesty in relationships.

Two people are intimate when they share their inmost thoughts and feelings in a way that promotes a close, usually private, connection with one another. Typically this intimate connection gives each partner a better, more truthful understanding of the other—a more honest

representation of that individual. True intimacy touches the deepest parts of a person—it promotes an enlightened change in each individual in the exchange because the connection allows one's intimate partner to see the inmost nature of oneself. As Steen Halling asserts, an intimate connection allows one to see their partner "as if for the first time," and that such an experience "is likely to be a milestone in one's relationship with that person and thus a memorable occasion" (16). In order to obtain such a connection, however, one must be honest with their intimate partner because otherwise, the connection would not represent one's truest self and thus cannot promote this inner growth or change. Hugh LaFollette and George Graham attest to the importance of honesty in intimate relationships in an article in the *Journal for Social and Personal Relationships* entitled "Honesty and Intimacy." This particular article is significant because it distinguishes between intimacy and love in order to suggest that two people can indeed love one another without having to be fully honest and thus without ever truly achieving intimacy. Indeed, "love" is defined by the New Oxford American Dictionary as, "an intense feeling of deep affection," where the term "affection" merely suggests an intense fondness or liking for another person. The dictionary definition of intimacy, on the other hand, is that it, "pertains to one's inmost thoughts and feelings." LaFollette and Graham explain that most studies of intimacy ignore the importance of honesty in developing intimate relationships and they aim to stress its importance (3). They assert that honesty in a relationship, "can promote a personal growth probably unachievable in any other way" (18). In other words, in order to be truly affected by an intimate connection and experience personal growth, one must be fully honest with their intimate partner. That is not to say that honesty always results in an intimate exchange, since the receiver of that honest information must be capable of using it to gain a better understanding of their partner, but honesty is indeed the first step to achieving intimacy.

In order to honestly represent oneself to another, one must be self-aware and self-defined, but unfortunately True Womanhood prevented a woman from defining herself on her own terms. In order to be honest, each partner in an encounter must know what is essential about him or herself and also be able to sufficiently portray an adequate picture of their essential nature (LaFollette 14). The cult of True Womanhood, on the other hand, often suppressed a woman's ability to know, and therefore convey, her true self to a partner in a relationship. Barbara Welter, who coined the term "True Womanhood" in a 1999 book, *The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860*, explains that because it was considered God's decree that man be superior to woman, when a woman submitted to this religious ideal it was considered her most feminine virtue (51). The ideals of True Womanhood were impossible to ignore; they were printed in women's journals, depicted through characters of popular literature, and most importantly, strictly enforced by society. Welter quotes *The Young Lady's Book* which summarized the necessity of passivity to its readers: "It is...certain, that in whatever situation of life a woman is placed from her cradle to her grave, a spirit of obedience and submission, pliability of temper, and humility of mind, are required from her" (51). True women were expected to conform and in exchange yield up their individuality.

Though the ideals of True Womanhood penetrated a large part of society, I do not mean to suggest that all nineteenth century women conformed to this ideology. The nineteenth century was a time of great social change as evidenced, for example, by the women's movement particularly in the latter half of the century; there were indeed women who rejected True Womanhood. But many did not. I do not intend to suggest that intimacy was never present in relationships in the nineteenth century because of True Womanhood but I do ask that we

recognize what a damaging effect this social construction had on many women's relationships who conformed, or at least tried to conform, to these ideals.

Many women did conform to the ideals of True Womanhood in fear of the social consequences if they did indeed break out of their defined gender roles. Women were told that if they did not submit to True Womanhood, they had no chance to experience companionship or love: "The American woman had her choice—she could define her rights in the way of the women's magazines...or she could go outside the home, seeking other rewards than love. It was a decision which, she was told, everything in her world depended on" (Welter 65). Some did step outside of gender roles, but journals and magazines said these defiant women were not women at all. Welter says that, "such women were tampering with society, undermining civilization. [They] were condemned in the strongest possible language—they were read out of the sex. 'They are only semi-women, mental hermaphrodites'" (65). The social pressure on women to conform to such ideals was catastrophic to intimacy for those who did indeed conform. True Womanhood was a form of social hypnotism, ensuring that women remained in their proper social place while making it impossible for them to embrace their individuality. Thus, women who did conform to this ideology were incapable of being honest with their partners about any individualistic trait that did not fit into the four cardinal virtues of True Womanhood.

The ideals of True Womanhood permeated more than just women's journals and magazines, but also were similarly depicted in numerous nineteenth century novels. For example, Mary Scudder, the protagonist of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *The Minister's Wooing*, is perhaps the ideal True Woman. Mary is overwhelmingly pious and pure and content with a life of domesticity. She is so consumed in bettering every other character in the novel that she rarely demonstrates any aspect of individuality. In one instance, her friend Cerinthy Ann

confesses her relationship troubles to Mary but Mary neglects to give any real advice. The narrator says, “[Mary] was so pure from selfishness, so heartily and innocently interested in what another was telling her...although, if they really had been called upon afterwards to state the exact portion in words which she added to the conversation, they would have been surprised to find it so small” (830-31). Indeed, Mary has little to add to any of her intimate exchanges and when she does engage in an encounter with another character, she typically relies only on her religious beliefs to further the conversation. She is so selfless that at times she seems incapable of locating her individuality to add anything true of herself to her relationships. She rarely represents herself as a unique individual and rather is only defined through the virtues of True Womanhood.

Furthermore, blanket honesty of one’s opinions is not enough to form an intimate connection. Though one may suggest that Mary supplies religious counseling to her friends because it is honest and true to who she is, her religiosity is not a fundamental characteristic of her individuality. By this I mean that most people in nineteenth century America were religious in some fashion, and to simply advise her friends to have faith, as she often does, does little to allow others to see her inmost self. LaFollette and Graham explain that, “Honesty is primarily... an attempted-achievement. It will not suffice simply to mouth statements which truthfully describe one's views. They must be directed to someone who is capable of constructing an honest (correct) picture of the speaker” (14). The receiver of this honest information must have a better understanding of the essence of their partner because of that confession. Rather, Mary simply regurgitates religious morals to her acquaintances in attempt to better them—never in regard for her own feelings or in effort to better know and define her individuality. Though she may be honest, she is a product of her society, rather oblivious of her subjectivity, and for most of the

novel, she seems incapable of adding anything individual and enlightening to an intimate exchange. In an article about genuine human contact in *The Minister's Wooing*, Marianne Noble says that in Stowe's culture, women

...value men's subjectivity more than their own. This is Mary Scudder's shortcoming—really, her only flaw. She cannot truthfully assert her own desires because she has been trained to locate her self-worth in self-denial. Through Mary, Stowe argues that to promote ethical relationships, women must reorient their thinking, repudiate a false ideal of selflessness, assert the value of their own subjectivity, and claim the right to their happiness. (697)

Indeed Mary is incapable of finding her self-worth because she is so imbedded in the societal expectations of True Women. In this quote, Noble points out that if Mary were to “assert the value of [her] own subjectivity” she would be able to find happiness. But she would find more than just happiness—she would be able to more honestly represent her individuality, and therefore find true intimacy.

What complicates this reading of Mary Scudder, however, is that Stowe greatly valued honesty (Kelley 307). Interestingly, even though Stowe supports these principles, her own protagonist, who is possibly the ideal True Woman, is dishonest about her true feelings throughout the novel—it is made clear in the beginning of the novel that Mary loves her childhood friend, James, but when James is presumed to be dead, Mary reluctantly agrees to marry Doctor Hopkins. But of course, James is not dead and returns in hopes of marrying Mary. She refuses to do so, however, simply in fear of hurting the Doctor's feelings and breaking her vow. It is only when her friend, Miss Prissy, intervenes and tells the Doctor of Mary's love for James that the novel is able to conclude with Marry and James happily wedded. Without the help

of Miss Prissy, we must wonder, or perhaps assume, that Mary would have married the Doctor and indeed lived in a marriage lacking in true intimacy. Stowe denies Mary the agency to be honest about her feelings. It is perhaps possible that Stowe was intending to create an imperfect character in Mary, and thus it would be acceptable for Mary to not fully adhere to both the ideals of True Womanhood and being fully honest at the same time. But it seems more likely that Stowe simply did not recognize the contradictions in Mary's character. It seems, therefore, that even though Stowe herself was a proponent of both honesty and True Womanhood, there are inherent contradictions in a woman practicing both ideals simultaneously. Though perhaps in theory True Womanhood and the idea of separate spheres should not hinder honesty and intimacy, in practice that is not the case.

Though there were women like Mary who fully conformed to the ideals of True Womanhood, there were similarly women who merely performed the ideals in order to gain economic security through marriage when they perceived there to be no other option. When unable to be viewed subjectively for their true individuality, women deceived their partners in order to at least maintain a relationship. Though women were incapable of representing an honest portrayal of themselves when confined in True Womanhood, deceiving one's intimate partner further limits the ability to achieve intimacy. Complete honesty of perceivably negative subject matter—such as a woman's deviation from True Womanhood—oftentimes can ruin a relationship. But LaFollette and Graham refute the idea that honesty is sometimes an obstacle of love: “deprivation of relevant information limits the other's perceived options. Intentionally to limit one's intimate's options is to violate the presumption of trust on which the relationship is built” (9-10). However, as I have already established, many nineteenth century women were essentially forced to suppress (or at least lie about) their individuality. In doing so, women

deprive their partners of the relevant information needed to understand the full essence of their being. But in order to not be shunned by their partners or society by deviating from their expected gender roles, many women merely played into the façade of True Womanhood in order to guarantee at least the appearance of love in disregard for the need of true intimacy.

This is precisely the point that Louisa May Alcott depicts through Jean Muir, the protagonist of *Behind A Mask, or A Woman's Power*. Outwardly, Jean appears to be a young, intelligent and sentimental governess but readers learn that, in reality, she is a thirty-year-old actress who has divorced her husband and is merely seeking economic support in marriage. She seduces every male member of the Coventry family until she ends happily married to Sir John Coventry, who refuses to hear the truth of her identity. Of course it is likely that had Jean been honest with who she was from the beginning, the family would have shunned her because of their own social veils—they would refuse to accept her honesty due to their own expectations of True Womanhood. Regardless, Jean doesn't give them the chance to see her true self—she deprives them of information limiting their ability to see an honest depiction of her and manipulates all of the male characters to achieve her own selfish goals. But, as appalling as Jean's actions are, she does so knowing that she has little other option. In order to at least gain economic stability, she is forced to pretend to conform to True Womanhood, and though her marriage to Sir John at the end of the novel is one completely based on deception, she does indeed attain her goal.

Not only did the social performance of True Womanhood hinder intimacy, but it also degraded women by reducing them merely to their sexual or sentimental powers. However, some critics assert that Jean's act is empowering, asserting that she undermines the patriarchy and establishes equality between men's social power and women's sexual and sentimental influence



of men. Teresa Gaul asserts that, “Jean...has control over a man’s sexual desires and is able to conform them to her will” (842). Nineteenth century society did promote respect for woman’s economic importance because of her sentimental worth and ability to control her husband and household because of it, thus supposedly promoting equality between the sexes. Glenna Matthews explains in her book, *Just A Housewife: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America*, that women were considered equal because of the extent to which nineteenth century society “[enshrined] the home and moral authority of the mother” (28). Because the private sphere was considered economically important, the woman, as the center of the family unit, was responsible for sustaining the goodness of family life. The concept of companionate marriage, a union based on love and mutual respect, emerged from the idea of separate but equal (Wayne 1).

Companionate marriage suggested that both male and female had to agree to the union as opposed to marriage unions of previous generations which were typically purely economic arrangements between a woman’s father and a husband-to-be. Thus companionate marriage suggested that marriages were more intimate since women were actually given a choice in their suitors. The union of men’s political power and women’s sentimental strength in marriage supposedly could result in an intimate relationship because of the understanding and respect for each partner’s unique authority.

There is no real possibility for intimacy when relationships are reduced to power struggles between man and woman, though some critics, like Gaul, claim that separate but equal gender roles promoted empowering relationships. Welter explains that, “some women were only happy when their husbands were ailing that they might have the joy of nursing him to recovery ‘thus gratifying their medical vanity and their love of power by making him more dependent on them’” (56). She goes on to quote that a husband once said that he sometimes suspected his wife

“almost wishes me dead—for the pleasure of being utterly inconsolable” (56). Undoubtedly this is evidence of a marital power struggle, and when each person in a relationship cares more about furthering their individual power, it seems clear that they would lose sight of trying to form a truly intimate connection through honesty. Furthermore, it is degrading to think that woman’s only power is rooted only in her performance of social ideals or in her sexuality. Though I will admit that there were probably many women who felt they were seen subjectively by their husbands though confined to domesticity, it seems that the severity of the social expectations of True Womanhood suggests that women were indeed intellectually stifled. Limiting women to only their sexual and sentimental “powers” ensured that they were never fully honest with their intimate partners because they could never fully embrace their intellectualism. Consider Stowe, author *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the book that quite literally changed a nation, who denied that she could be considered a truly distinguished literary woman despite her accomplishments (Kelley 185). Even as one of the most recognizable and influential women of the century, Stowe resembles her character Mary—trained to locate her self-worth only through her domesticity without recognizing her more immense talents.

Furthermore, the legal limitations on women reduced a woman’s ability to assert power and thus there simply never could be equality in the idea of separate but equal gender roles. The same critics who express the equality in companionate marriage also recognize its limits:

Companionate marriage notwithstanding, the law gave husbands by far the greater share of power within a marriage in the antebellum years... It is useful to be reminded that, while the culture reflected an image of the woman as moral arbiter, until well into the nineteenth century the law gave men the power of the patriarch. This was accomplished

by the restrictions on a married woman's property rights and also on her right to custody of her own children in the event of a divorce (Matthews 32).

These legal restrictions affected the quality of these supposedly companionate marriages.

Because legally men were still seen as the head of the household, women had little incentive to end a marriage lacking intimacy in pursuit of an intimate one. It is clear that though the value of women's sentimentality was considered important in the nineteenth century, the legal restrictions prevented women from ever truly being equal. In *The Minister's Wooing*, Mary expresses the unequal division of power between men and women in an argument with Aaron Burr: "You men can have everything, ambition, wealth, power; a thousand ways are open to you: women have nothing but their heart; and when that is gone, all is gone" (814). Thus we see that though women were told that their moral power was equal to men's legal power, this justification for a separation of the sexes is clearly faulty.

But even regardless of these legal restrictions, women often forfeited the only social power they had—their sentimentality and moral strength—in exchange for a man's happiness, thus giving up what little social power they had. For example, in *The Minister's Wooing*, when Mary's mother asks her if she would be willing to marry Doctor Hopkins, Mary declares, "If he really loves me, mother, it would give him great pain if I refused," after she hysterically cries at the realization that she will marry him (772). She suppresses her true emotions of her love for James, when deciding to marry the Doctor. Though she wisely considers the harshness of her honesty, she does so ignoring her own true feelings. She disregards honesty in exchange for consideration of another's feelings. Her submission to a man's desires outweighs her true emotions and thus suggests that a woman's power in her sentimentality could never be equal to man's power to control her.

Thus far I have discussed the ways that women were forced to be dishonest in relationships because of their confinement to True Womanhood, but the social ideals of True Womanhood similarly veiled men in their attempts at intimate exchanges. When thinking about the concept of true intimacy, one must consider the fact that a genuine connection between two individuals must be just that: two-sided. Consider this quote from *The Minister's Wooing*: "Half the misery in the world comes of want of courage to speak and to hear the truth plainly and in a spirit of love" (814). Here, Stowe addresses two essential aspects of intimate relationships: one, that it requires honesty, and also that it requires a two-way interaction; one must be willing to speak *and hear* the truth. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil," the protagonist, Mr. Hooper, finds that when he wears a veil over his face he is shunned by his community and abandoned by his lover. In this instance, Hooper wears the veil in attempt to be honest with others—to admit that he, just as equally as the rest of his society, is a sinner but his attempt to admit this is faulty because those around him are unwilling to accept his honesty. Because Hooper's lover, and the rest of his society, in "The Minister's Black Veil" refuse to hear the truth about his veil, they lose the chance for intimacy. Or consider the protagonist of Hawthorne's most famous work, *The Scarlett Letter*, where Hester Prynne willingly wears the A on her chest to be honest and admit her faults, but is scorned because of her honesty. So again it is not enough to simply be honest about oneself to others if the receiver of that honesty is unwilling set aside judgment to utilize that information in a productive way to promote intimacy. The social expectations of True Womanhood, therefore, similarly veiled men in intimate relationships since they likely were unable to understand and accept a woman who stepped outside of her typical gender roles.

Though honesty is one of the most important factors for stimulating an intimate relationship, it is not the only facet necessary. Stowe introduces another important aspect of intimacy, which is that honesty must be presented “in a spirit of love.” The idea of tailored honesty is described in LaFollette and Graham’s paper: “...intimate exchanges require sensitivity and trust—though these may be difficult to discern. Openness can be harsh...whereas an intimate encounter cannot be brutal, harsh or inconsiderate. The revealer must have the recipient in mind; that is, must have either *communicative* or *interest* sensitivity” (4-5). For communicative sensitivity, in effort to be clearly understood, the revealer tailors their honesty to ensure the listener will be able to comprehend the information. For interest sensitivity, the revealer attends to the recipient’s non-communicative interests or desires in effort to not offend or upset the listener (5). LaFollette and Graham explain that revelations can have both forms of sensitivity, but the absence of either form means that intimacy is also absent (5). Obviously it would be difficult to tailor sensitivity to another’s feelings when you don’t truthfully know that individual which is why honesty is the first-step toward an intimate connection.

The lack of honesty implicit in True Womanhood does not suggest, however, that there were never intimate exchanges between man and wife in nineteenth century society. But there is a difference between a series of intimate exchanges and an intimate relationship, according to LaFollette and Graham. They define intimate relationships as being marked by regular intimate encounters or exchanges, which, as we already have discussed, require honest exchanges between two individuals (1). LaFollette and Graham also explain that intimate relationships are typically marked by reciprocal exchanges because, “The listener in an intimate exchange, believing himself or herself to have been trusted and treated sensitively, therefore reciprocates by being intimate” (6). But if a woman attempts to share an intimate exchange with a spouse who

cannot understand or accept her individuality, it is likely that the man will never reciprocate the exchange and therefore these attempted exchanges never amount to intimate relationships.

Furthermore, I argue that a major difference between experiencing a series of mere intimate exchanges versus being invested in an intimate relationship is that in a relationship, the honesty revealed in the intimate exchanges work together to depict the fundamental nature of each individual. Without the full understanding of the essence of another person, one cannot claim to have a truly intimate relationship with that person, even if their relationship is marked by minimal intimate exchanges. Though nineteenth century man and wife may have shared intimate exchanges, True Womanhood prevented men from seeing and accepting the complete individuality and subjectivity of their wives.

Though intimacy was hindered in marriages because of True Womanhood, intimate relationships were promoted between women who, cast aside from the public world, made the private sphere a place for the complete self-expression, and in doing so, supplied women with a place of complete honesty. Maxine Van De Wetering explains in her article, "The Popular Concept of 'Home' in Nineteenth Century America" that "Domestic seclusion...provided the kind of privacy and intimate surroundings most conducive to honest self-disclosure and self-realization. Such intimate domesticity...generated close familial ties...that, in turn, invited self-revelation among family members" (22). Obviously this self-revelation is an agent toward finding true intimacy, and if we are to believe that nineteenth century society truly believed that, in a loving family, individuals felt free to be themselves as Wetering suggests, then perhaps the separate domestic sphere did promote some form of intimacy. I do find some validity in the suggestion that intimacy is stimulated women when secluded themselves in their private sphere, but this self-revelation, I believe, occurred only between women.

Wetering seems to agree because later in her article, she explains that there was indeed a separation drawn between male and female family members, suggesting that, though both men and women may have been able to have these self-revelations in the home, they were done so apart from each other. She explains that a woman's unqualified love for her husband was not necessarily true intimacy because it was "disinterested love," love which was "much like the love of God—unqualified, unmerited, and withal dependable. Men...could love with great intensity...but generally speaking, the sternly didactic role of the patriarch frequently blocked the possibilities of comfortable self-disclosure in his presence" (23). Thus we see that though the home promoted self-revelations, while it may have merited intimate exchanges intermittent within one gender, the separation between men and women hindered intimacy between the sexes.

But again, though men and women were socially separated, intimate relationships between women in the nineteenth century were extremely common. Consider the close relationship between Emily Dickinson and her sister-in-law, Sue Dickinson, who maintained intimate correspondences throughout their lifetimes. Even Mary in *The Minister's Wooing* is intimate with her friend Virginie de Frontignae when confined in their private sphere. In an article by Susan Harris entitled "The Female Imaginary in *The Minister's Wooing*" Harris explains that Stowe's novel has a minor female-oriented plot, separate from the "androcentric" plot that indeed subjugates the female characters and argues that the "gynocentric" plot merits attention. In the gynocentric plot, the female characters take control of their surroundings, separated from the oppressive male culture and embrace their femininity and sexuality. They "[break] free of the male sphere around which [they] orbit; women [in the private sphere] are able not only to center themselves in their female world but also to locate their own sexuality and/or spirituality independent of the mores of the larger female community" (184-85). Harris describes Mary's

garret-boudoir as the locus of the female imaginary—the one place where she is truly herself. I do see some validity in this argument, and believe that Mary did have intimate connections with some of the other female characters of the novel because as Wetering suggested, when women are secluded in a loving environment, they are free to be themselves and therefore capable of achieving honest intimacy.

Of course, True Womanhood was not an all-encompassing social construction; there indeed were women who did not conform to the concepts of True Womanhood during the nineteenth century, but outlasting effects this social construction still exist in society today even though we no longer conform to the cult of True Womanhood. For instance, most modern women are still more responsible for childcare and household tasks than their partners, and though women are no longer legally shut out from the intellectual or political parts of society, the so-called “glass ceiling” still socially restricts women from reaching true equality with men. I must reiterate that total equality is not necessary for true intimacy, but let us consider an article published in *The New York Times* in 2007 by Maureen Dowd, which asserted that men today still do not marry smart women—that men of the twenty-first century are still threatened by women who defy typical gender roles. Of course this was a highly contested issue, denied by many modern feminists, but the fact that this is even still an argument to be had suggests that there are still problems inherent in socially confining women to these domestic roles. Perhaps once we truly shatter the glass ceiling, and completely do away with these constricting gender roles, we will live in a world where it will be much easier to express oneself more honestly and truly to others, and stimulate more intimate relationships. It’s time to remove the veil and embrace honest intimacy.



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