

Julie Casalou
UC254
Primary Source Analysis
3/28/13

At first glance, etiquette books, behavior guides, and gastronomy texts wouldn't seem to provide incredible insights into the workings of the class systems and family politics of the late 19th century, but I was very surprised to find the opposite. By examining housekeeping guides from the late 1800s and early 1900s, I found much more than recipes and tips for stain removal. These books included lessons on proper behavior, parenting, faith, moral guidance, and many other areas of life. However, whether they intended to or not, these books also succeeded in securing one's place in a high societal class, and pushed these high class values on children from a very young age.

When perusing through old etiquette manuals, I was intrigued by sections about the care, and rearing of children. It was like reading the Parenting Book of the 19th Century! All of these texts shared a common theme—preserving the innocence of childhood. Charles Dickens perfectly described this perceived innocence in his poem, “The Children.” which I have included an excerpt of at the end of this paper. Children were to be protected from both harsh weather conditions and the harshness of reality. The ideal childhood was thought to be simple and “bright”, filled with games and stories, and of course, unshaking relationships with their parents.

The job of a mother was the most pivotal, and taxing, role that a woman could ever hold. It was a mother's responsibility to always know and tend to the needs, health, and daily routines of her children. She had to teach obedience and respect without using punishment or harsh words and actions that could be reflected in her children's behavior.

If a child misbehaved, it was considered to be a reflection on a mother's failure. In households with a higher income, many women were able to hire governesses or nursery maids to tend to the daily routines of their children, but mothers were still expected to spend quality time with their offspring every day. One particularly interesting way of doing this was a tradition called the "children's hour", an activity reminiscent of a fictional story like *Mary Poppins*. For an hour every afternoon the children would break away from their governesses or maids to spend time with their mother, to present their problems and daily trials and receive solutions, then engage in game-play or storytelling. This hour would often conveniently fall during a sophisticated mother's afternoon teatime, and the children would serve their mother her tea, "as children love to do". This was meant the happiest time of day for many kids. The view of a picturesque relationship between a mother and her children was portrayed in every housekeeping book I encountered, reinforcing the idea that this happy and ever cheerful lifestyle would turn bright-eyed children into intelligent, competent, successful men and dutiful, pious, nurturing women.

Food played a large role in the nurturing and training of children. From each meal, children needed to be nourished and sustained, which made their food much less extravagant than the adult's menu. Keeping with the idea of a daily routine, meals would be served for children at the same hours every day, and snacking between meals was strongly discouraged. This was just one way in which discipline was instilled through food; another was to deprive them of options at mealtime. This limited pickiness and fostered obedience in stubborn kids, as hunger is a very effective negotiator. Food made for children was not of very expensive quality, but consisted of many milk and dairy

products, fish, puddings, macaroni, and cheaper cuts of meat. As we mentioned in class, food played a larger role in the lives of these families than simply satisfying hunger—it was considered to provide spiritual sustenance and all-around well being, providing a healthy future for those who were correctly nourished. This theory was what struck me most: what does that mean for the families who cannot afford (literally) this kind of lifestyle?

Books written about etiquette, place settings, child rearing, and housekeeping were a luxury to those who could afford them. In the late 1800s-early 1900s, many families at the time were facing such debilitating financial burdens that they were forced to send their young children to work in dangerous factories or backbreaking farms. During this time period, child labor was at a peak, which in turn reduced the amount of education that working children could receive. Families in these situations could not concern themselves with teaching their children which fork to use for their salad, when they were solely focused on having a meal to serve their family at all. When they did have enough food to feed their family, it surely wasn't up to the standards of nourishment and spiritual-satisfaction that these books encouraged. The implications of simple differences in eating, let alone behavior and education, really set these classes apart. The sharp contrast between the lives of these laborers and the upper class is apparent in these etiquette books, in the depictions of leisure and ritual surrounding dining and entertaining.

Housekeeping manuals are clearly directed toward women of the upper class; women who did not work in the public sphere, but instead tended to the house and children. Women of a lower social status would have neither the time to read these books

nor the means to practice and perfect their lessons. At the time, providing a “bright” childhood and opportunities for your children was only possible as a result of affluence and comfortable living. This still holds true today, although not to the same degree. Before the “American Dream” existed and equal opportunity was boasted, social classes were reinforced and reproduced by one’s cultural capital—etiquette books served as a manual for securing a comfortable spot in the social hierarchy.

For upper class children, the cultural education and social priming began at an early age. The activities that filled their days, the kinds of foods they ate, the clothing they wore, and the mannerisms that were taught all were utilized to build individuals that would later benefit society. Education, piety, and moral values were very important in these families, and detailed descriptions of how to instill these in children filled the pages of housekeeping and mothering manuals. Children who did not demonstrate the values deemed necessary by society were thought to be a disgrace to their family and a poor reflection on the parents. Thus, children raised in lower income families that were not exposed to formal dinner parties or upper class morals stood no chance of climbing the social ladder. The bright and opportunistic future, characterized by imagination, education, and discipline that was provided to children in wealthy families was substituted for labor and stress in the lives of working children.

All of the blame for social inequality and class division cannot be placed on the etiquette guides and manuals for housewives, as they truly may have not had an impact on one’s social class, but it was the ideas they present. To be a member of the high society, one must act and eat in a certain way, and it was this knowledge that set you apart. Passing on this knowledge, or cultural capital, to one’s children would solidify

their place in the upper class, because they would know how to behave as proper, courteous public figures, as well as perfect hosts/guests of societal functions. If your children obtained this knowledge, they could then pass it on to their children, and so forth, securing your family's lineage in high-class societal standing. Etiquette manuals and fancy cookbooks did not cause this separation in classes, they simply fueled it along and provided assurance for worrisome housewives and mothers.

From primary source cookbooks, etiquette guides, and housekeeping and mothering manuals, I learned about the styles of living in upper/middle class homes, the types of values that were valued in the family, and how they were passed on to their children. What isn't written in black and white is how acting a certain way and teaching your children to behave similarly will solidify your standing in a high social class, letting you in on a secret to success that many individuals will never be privy to. Even today, cultural capital and a knowledge of certain societal "norms" plays a large role in determining one's social standing, financially, politically, and economically. These sources just prove that our societal education and "priming" begins at a young age, secretly corrupting the innocence of our childhood, and this has been happening for hundreds of years.

The Children
by Charles Dickens

When the lessons and tasks are all ended,
And the school for the day is dismissed
And the little ones gather around me,
To bid me good-night and be kissed:
Oh, the little white arms that encircle
My neck in a tender embrace!
Oh, the smiles that are halos of heaven,
Shedding sunshine of love on my face!

And when they are gone I sit dreaming
Of my children too lovely to last;
Of love that my heart will remember
When it waked to the pulse of the past
Ere the world and its wickedness made me
A partner of sorrow and sin,
When the Glory of God was about me,
And the glory of gladness within.

Oh, my heart grows weak as a woman's
And the fountains of feeling will flow,
When I think of the paths, steep and stony,
Where the feet of the dear ones must go;
Of the mountains of sin hanging o'er them,
Of the tempest of Fate blowing wild;
Oh! There is nothing on earth half so holy
As the innocent heart of a child!

They are idols of hearts and of households;
They are angels of God in disguise;
His sunlight still sleeps in their tresses;
His glory still gleams in their eyes;
Oh! those truants from home and from
heaven,
They have made me more manly and mild
And I know how Jesus could liken
The Kingdom of God to a child....

References

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