

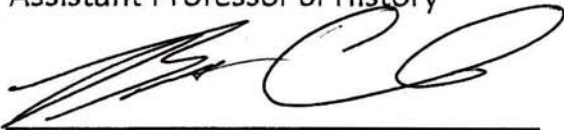
**“The Same Credit for Our Virtues”:
Ida B. Wells-Barnett and the True Black Women of
the Anti-Lynching Movement**

By
Sarah Conrad

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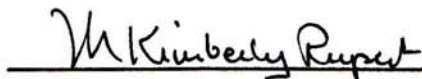
Mark Edwards PhD.
Assistant Professor of History



Brent Cline PhD.
Associate Professor of English



Mark Correll PhD.
Associate Professor of History



Kimberly Rupert PhD.
Provost, SAU

Women of the nineteenth century were expected to live a certain lifestyle that emphasized the ideal that “the true woman’s place was unquestionably by her own fireside--as daughter, sister, but most of all as wife and mother.”¹ Women reigned in the domestic sphere and were forced to stay; anything outside the home was the domain of men. It was in these separate spheres where the concept of “true womanhood” first began to take form. The true woman was submissive to her husband, cared for and raised the children, and did not stray outside of her sphere of influence. These women were from the upper and middle classes. However, to be considered a true woman was often the goal for women of all social standings. It was the ideal that society had placed upon them as to how they should act and where their skills were best put to use.

African American women were barred from becoming true women. This was a status only white women of class could obtain. Black women were seen as the lowest class of Americans, being inferior both for their skin color and their gender. African American scholar Anna Julia Cooper laments the “supercilious caste spirit in America which cynically assumes ‘A Negro woman cannot be a lady.’”² Since true womanhood assumed a stable home and family life, slavery made it impossible for black women to achieve this lifestyle. Women were expected to work alongside men. When black men were killed by the plantation owners, or lynched in the years just following the end of slavery women had to assume the position of the man. Women were the heads of the household in 25-30% of urban families in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and

¹ Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, No. 2, part 1 (1966): 151-174.

² Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice From the South*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 32.

these percentages doubled in rural areas.³ Slavery and the years immediately following it tore the African American home apart and forced black women into roles that kept them from pursuing true womanhood. Ostracized by white women for their reportedly unladylike qualities, black women were segregated to a place outside of womanhood.⁴

Investigative journalist and anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett did not agree with this gender apartheid. She believed all women had the qualifications to be a lady and not just white women. It was through her involvement in the anti-lynching campaign that Wells defended her belief about African American women. Wells began writing articles about the horrors of lynching after the murder of three close friends in Memphis.⁵ Her writings exposed the truth behind the causes of lynching, and they established her role in the anti-lynching movement. Her determination for truth and justice as well as her powerful speech and prose made her a prominent anti-lynching muckraker.

Wells was not afraid to speak the truth. This inspired her campaign to not only protect against the killing of innocent black men, but also to de-racialize the ideals of womanhood. She argued that African American women involved in the anti-lynching movement were displaying ladylike qualities of protecting their home and family. Wells wanted to challenge the belief that black women were inferior to whites. She writes in her article, "Our Women":

"-Among the many things which had transpired to dishearten the Negroes in their effort to attain the level in status of civilized races...none sting more

³ Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 108.

⁴ Hazel V. Carby, "On the Threshold of Women's Era: Lynching, Empire and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985), 270, (accessed March 22, 2015), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343470>.

⁵ Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970), 47.

deeply and keenly as...the jest and sneer with which our women are spoken of, and the utter incapacity or refusal to believe there are among us mothers, wives and maidens who have attained a true, noble and refining womanhood.”⁶

Wells saw no difference between black and white women. She was one of the first to print any suggestion of the impurity of white women.⁷ Wells wished to disprove the automatic ideals associated with white women and, in the process, prove the humanity of black women. Wells herself was an example of a refined African American woman, having been raised by her mother to strive for womanhood. And her anti-lynching pamphlets provide evidence that prove lady-like ideals were not something all white women possessed. The women fighting with Wells in the anti-lynching movement were just as much true women as whites, and yet they were denied the title. By refuting lynching and everything it stood for, Wells was also supporting the end of racialized views of womanhood.

This paper will discuss the Cult of True Womanhood as a racialized societal standard in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For women of color and lower social standing, true womanhood was an unobtainable dream, their race and class barring them from achieving the status. Womanhood was exclusively open to whites of the upper and middle classes. I will also offer a brief history of lynching in America, paying special attention to the period following Reconstruction until World War II, the most brutal era for lynching.⁸ Along with this I will be expressing the justifications behind lynching, which included a wide variety of excuses, but the most prominent of

⁶ Wells-Barnett, “Our Women,” *New York Freeman*, reprinted from the *Memphis Scimitar*, (January 1, 1887), sourced in Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*, ed. Miriam Decosta-Willis, 186.

⁷ Crystal Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 2009), 90.

⁸ Manfred Berg, *Popular Justice: A History of Lynching in America* (Chicago: The American Way Series, 2011), 92.

which was black male rape of white women. White men claimed they lynched African Americans to protect women from the lustful black man, and to preserve a woman's honor. This protection, however, was never extended to African American women, as observed in Wells' writings. I will detail her involvement in the anti-lynching movement, as both a way to protect innocent black men as well as redefine the ideals of womanhood. By exposing the immorality of white ladies and denying the chivalry that defended lynching, I argue that Wells was not only fighting for the protection of African American men but also to deconstruct the racial barriers of womanhood.

The Racial Cult of True Womanhood

Among the historians studying the Cult of True Womanhood, a vast majority of them point to Barbara Walters and her article on the subject in the 1966 *American Quarterly*. Walters described the Cult of True Womanhood and how it shaped the life of women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first section of this paper will be using Welter's writing, among other more recent work, as a major source for understanding the Cult of True Womanhood. It will also demonstrate the class and racial politics behind this ideal.

According to Walters, true womanhood could be described as the "attributes...by which a woman judged herself, and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and her society."⁹ Womanly ideals were divided into four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.¹⁰ Each of these virtues was instilled in women from a young age, without which they would lose their respectability and their family's

⁹ Walters, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 152

¹⁰ Ibid

honor.¹¹ However it was mainly upper and middle class women and girls who were expected to conform to these virtues.¹² The lower classes did not have the resources to pursue womanhood.

The social norms of the nineteenth century dictated that women were the caretakers of the household. It was their duty to run the house, care for the children, and keep her family devoted to God.¹³ Piety was the “core of women’s virtue and the source of their strength,” for a devout woman would also be chaste and domestic.¹⁴ Submissiveness was central, for a woman was to be the “ornament of man.” She was to “lighten his cares, sooth his sorrows and augment his joys.”¹⁵ A lady’s place was in the home. She would never argue with her husband, whom God had placed above her as her superior and protector.¹⁶ Men expected a wife who was “domestic and homeloving,” as one man stated in the *Fayetteville Observer*.¹⁷ Any woman who did not fit these credentials would not be considered a good wife or lady.

The most essential part of true womanhood was a woman’s purity. Chastity was the defining factor of what separated ladies from the lower classes. Purity was seen as “the highest beauty,” and any impure woman was viewed as “unfeminine, and unnatural,” and thus unfit to be a lady.¹⁸ In a society that did not stress purity for men, the true woman was to be on her guard and keep any man from taking away her

¹¹ Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 44.

¹² Rebecca J. Fraser, *Gender, Race and Family in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 42.

¹³ Ibid, 52.

¹⁴ Welters, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” 152.

¹⁵ Ibid, 169-170.

¹⁶ Ibid, 159.

¹⁷ Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 49.

¹⁸ Welters, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” 154 and 157.

virginity.¹⁹ For a woman to be without her purity was viewed as such a crime that many women's magazines referred to it as worse than death.²⁰ Marriage was seen as the end goal for all ladies, and a woman who was not chaste had a near impossible chance of getting married and could never become a true woman.

A girl's family was one of her main teachers when it came to learning how to be a lady. Mothers and aunts were the perfect models for girls to see what a true woman looked like. Girls were taught by their mother useful skills such as reading, writing, grammar, history, the running of a household, and more ornamental activities like needlework, painting, and dancing.²¹ These were arts girls would need in order to run a successful household and raise children to be good Americans.²² For girls who did not have a mother to learn from, an aunt or grandmother was just as capable of instructing them. One woman wrote a series of letters to her niece in which she offered her years of knowledge and wisdom on what it means to be a true woman. Her letters include advice on the importance of piety, the governance of temper, rules on proper dress, and domestic duties. All of these were areas in which a young lady must improve in order to be considered a true woman.²³ The letters were later published as the *Young Ladies Companion* so that her guidance would continue to influence young girls, as they became ladies.

¹⁹ Ibid, 155.

²⁰ Ibid, 154.

²¹ G. W., "Desultory Speculator," *The Southern Literary Messenger* 5 (August, 1839), 598-601, (accessed February 28, 2015), <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moajrnl/acf2679.0005.009/610:10?page=root:size=100:view=text>.

²² Welters, "*The Cult of True Womanhood*," 172.

²³ Margaret Coxe, *The Young Ladies Companion: in a series of letters* (Harvard University: I.N Whiting), 1839, (accessed May 13, 2014). http://books.google.com/books?id=xjQEAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q=%22true%20womanhood%22&f=false.

But the home was not the only place that could give instructions on womanhood. Society often had its influence as well, in pamphlets and magazines written specifically for women to help them understand and act in the most ladylike manner possible. Writers like Sarah Hale and Catharine Beecher upheld the expectations society had placed on women, to follow the four cardinal virtues of womanhood. Beecher's *A Treatise of Domestic Economy* (1842) detailed the roles of a woman and reiterated the importance of women remaining in a separate sphere from men, "in order that the great work of society may be better carried on."²⁴ According to Beecher, a woman's place was in the home and nowhere else.

One of the most widely read magazines at the time, *Godey's Lady's Books*, was a woman's companion and consultant in all things "lady-like." Edited by Sarah J. Hale, its numerous volumes contained everything from recipes and patterns for the good housewife, to poems and stories for entertainment. One of the most useful pieces of *Godey's Lady's Books* were the articles that gave advice and instructions on how to be a lady. One article, the "Cursory Remarks on a Wife", described the wife as "the most careful preserver of his health, the kindest attendant during his sickness, a faithful advisor in distress, a comforter in affliction, a prudent manager of his domestic affairs, and one of the greatest blessings heaven could bestow upon man."²⁵ With such instruction from magazines and family members, young upper and middle class girls had all the instruction they needed in order to become true woman.

²⁴ Catharine Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy, for the use of Young Ladies at Home* (Boston T. H. Webb, 1842), 28 reprinted at <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/sentimnt/snescebhp.html>, (accessed March 20, 2015).

²⁵ Sarah Hale, "Cursory Remarks on a Wife", *Godey's Lady's Books* 5 (July-December 1832): 8, date accessed April 20, 2014.

While it was a goal all women wished to aspire to, true womanhood was not a reality for women of the lower classes. All of the virtues and expectations of womanhood were reserved for women of high society. These were the people who had the money, protection, and time to learn to become true women. As historian Evelyn Higginbotham stated, “Ladies were not merely women; they represented a class, a differentiated status within the generic category of ‘women.’”²⁶ Women of the lower classes were often denied this statute. *Godey’s Lady’s Books* and other magazines that were dedicated to improving the lives of women were written with the upper classes in mind. Having servants and the funds to seek education were common expectations for ladies, excluding many women of lower classes in the process.

For women living in the lower and working classes, true womanhood was more a dream than a possible reality. Especially true in the South, a poor white woman was incredibly shameful because she violated the norms of femininity and domesticity.²⁷ Ideally, women were to devote their time to the domestic sphere and allow men to work in the fields or office.²⁸ Any woman who had to work outside the home was going against the norms of society and the prescribed image of women. According to one Virginia slaveholder, as quoted by Victoria Bynum, for white girls, working outside of the house was worse than for men because “no girl hereabouts, whose character was good, would ever hire out to do menial service.”²⁹ However lower class women did not

²⁶ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” *Signs*, 17 no. 2 (1992), 261.

²⁷ Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 6.

²⁸ Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 74.

²⁹ Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 6-7.

have a choice in the matter but were required to work in order to help support their family. As a result they were ostracized from femininity and womanhood.

The lower classes were not the only ones who could not become true women. No black woman could enjoy the status of a lady.³⁰ They were deemed by society in general to be “ineligible candidates for civilizing by the virtue of their Blackness.”³¹ Black women were the complete opposite of female sexual purity.³² Precisely because of their race, African American women were never seen as having any qualities that were similar to a lady. Even before emancipation, society labeled black women as unladylike. If a slave woman was not seen working in the field, the Plantation owners accused her of “playing the lady” and trying to be something she clearly was not.³³ Plantation owners were not the only ones who felt this way either. Northerners as well as officials from the Freedmen’s Bureau all believed black women could not be ladies. Any black woman who worked in the home was “lazy.”³⁴

Emancipation brought no change. Black women were still viewed as inferior.³⁵ They were, as one white woman put it, the “Frankenstein product of civilization” and completely outside the realm of a lady.³⁶ No longer slaves but still viewed as subservient, many black women took positions in the home, cooking, cleaning and caring for the children of wealthy whites.³⁷ The white families soon labeled black women in such positions as the “Mammie.” Seen as the dedicated house servant and

³⁰ Higginbotham, “African American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” 261.

³¹ Fraser, *Gender, Race and Family in Nineteenth Century America*, 51.

³² Glenn, *Unequal Freedom*, 122.

³³ *Ibid*, 100.

³⁴ *Ibid*.

³⁵ Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 39.

³⁶ Patricia Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform: 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) 9.

³⁷ Tera W. Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 26.

nursemaid, “Mammie” was completely devoted to the white family she served.³⁸ While the employers saw it as a term of endearment, it labeled black women as inferior in the sense that they could never aspire to be of the same social standing as their white mistress. They were perpetually a “Mammie” and never a lady.

More problematic for African American women was the stereotype that all black women were capable of being the “Jezebel.” It characterized them as ungovernably lustful, which “made chastity impossible.”³⁹ “Jezebels” were the complete opposite of the Victorian lady, their only goal to seduce white men.⁴⁰ And it was a stereotype that all black women were affected by. Even those who were seen as “Mammies” could, under different circumstances, be labeled a “Jezebel.”⁴¹ It was seen as a part of a black woman’s nature to be promiscuous.⁴² The very idea that African American women could be ladies was completely foreign to most whites during this time because of the amoral nature of blacks.⁴³ One southern woman wrote in the *Independent*: “Negro women evidence more nearly the popular idea of total depravity than men do...I cannot imagine such a creation as a virtuous black woman.”⁴⁴ Because chastity was such a vital part of true womanhood, and society viewed the black woman as incapable of morality, it was never considered a status black women could obtain. They were never treated with the same respects shown toward whites. Men never raised their hats in respect, nor were they addressed as “Miss” or “Mrs.” as any proper woman would be. Instead

³⁸ Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.M. Norton & Co., 1999), 49.

³⁹ Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 36.

⁴⁰ White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 29 and 176.

⁴¹ Ibid, 46.

⁴² Higginbotham, “African American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” 265.

⁴³ Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 89-90.

⁴⁴ “Experiences of the Race Problem. By a Southern White Woman,” *Independent*, 56 (March 17, 1904), Cited in Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 190.

they were called “auntie” and “sister,” completely rejecting any notion that they were ladies.⁴⁵ It was outrageous for many white ladies to see a black woman claiming the titles of a true woman and dressing as one.⁴⁶ Only a lady could be called “Miss” and wear lace gloves and a starched dress. No matter their education, refinement, or character, a black woman would never enjoy the status of a lady.⁴⁷

Due to the stereotypes placed upon them during the years of slavery, African American women were denied the opportunity to become true women. Black women were viewed as more laborers for the plantation owners; their gender did not keep them from working in the fields. Even when slavery ended these ideals about black women did not change. They were still perceived as incapable of performing the duties of a lady. Some black women may have had a better chance of improving their social class, but their racial status kept them from achieving equality with white women. A clear example of black women’s continued inferiority was demonstrated through the lynch law era and the racialized protections of women it maintained. Because black women were not believed to possess the purity and domesticity of a true woman, they were not protected from assault like other women were. White men used the rape of white women as an excuse to lynch African American men. However preserving a woman’s purity was never important when it was a black woman who was assaulted. Thus the laws that allowed the killing of black men also perpetuated the rape of black women without any consequences.

Ida B. Wells and the Lynch Laws

⁴⁵ Glenn, *Unequal Freedom*, 118-119.

⁴⁶ White, *A’rn’t I A Woman?* 173.

⁴⁷ Higginbotham, “African American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” 261.

The inequality African American women experienced is one of the main reasons Ida B. Wells worked as a journalist. Born during the Civil War, Wells grew up in the evolving dynamics of racial segregation as slavery came to an end but African Americans were still discriminated against. This notion is what first sparked her interest in muckraking journalism. She began writing for the *Evening Star* and the *Living Way*. Using the penname "Iola," Wells wrote for African Americans, discussing topics that she believed concerned "our people," and styling her articles for the common man to understand.⁴⁸ She used her essays as a way to express her beliefs about the injustices shown towards African Americans. In one such editorial for a church newspaper, Wells recounts her outrage at the Chesapeake Railroad company for forcefully removing her from the "ladies car" when she refused to be moved.⁴⁹ She was not afraid to write the truth, whether it was about the racist actions of the railroad companies, the inequality of colored schools in Memphis, or even lynching.⁵⁰

Her muckraking articles flourished when she became editor of the newspaper *Free Speech*, in 1887. As editor she continued publishing articles criticizing the educational system without fear of repercussions. "I thought it was right to strike a blow against a glaring evil," she writes, "and I [do] not regret it."⁵¹ This mentality would be the basis for her crusade against lynching, which began only a few years after she became editor. In 1892 three of her close friends were killed because of the competition their grocery store created for another store owned by a white man. In the introduction to her autobiography Wells's daughter writes that as a result of their murder, Wells

⁴⁸ Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice*, 23-24.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 18-20.

⁵⁰ Ibid, xix.

⁵¹ Ibid, 37.

“turned her scathing pen on the lynchers and on the white population who allowed and condoned such a lynching.”⁵² Wells dedicated herself to exposing the horrors of lynching without holding any reserves. When lynchers tried to quiet her by destroying *Free Speech’s* printing press, Wells did not quit.⁵³ She continued writing for the *New York Age* as well as lecturing and printing pamphlets that provided the facts about lynching.⁵⁴ Because Wells lived in a time when lynching was the norm of society, she put her own safety on the line in order to end lynching and save the lives of innocent men.

Among the injustices that African Americans experienced, the act of lynching was one of the worst. Historians normally trace the origins of lynching in America to the eighteenth century and to Colonel Charles Lynch.⁵⁵ Lynch and his counterparts were known for hanging “miscreants” outside of the law and calling it “lynching.”⁵⁶ They did not like to wait for the tedious justice system and instead took matters into their own hands. At first lynching was not strictly associated with African Americans. Colonel Lynch and his men would lynch Tories during the Revolutionary War, which often included violent acts of public humiliation, whippings, as well as tarring and feathering.⁵⁷ Traditionally, lynching was meant to be an act of justice for heinous crimes that the corrupt court system would otherwise ignore.⁵⁸

However lynching took on a whole new meaning approaching the Civil War and Reconstruction eras. The 1835 execution of five gamblers in Vicksburg, Mississippi, was

⁵² Ibid, xix.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid, xix, xxi.

⁵⁵ Manfred Berg, *Popular Justice: A History of Lynching in America* (Chicago: The American Way Series, 2011), 3.

⁵⁶ Christopher Waldrep, *Lynching in America: A History in Documents* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), e-book, 31.

⁵⁷ Berg, *Popular Justice*, 3.

⁵⁸ Waldrep, *Lynching in America*, 107; Berg, *Popular Justice*, 69.

a crucial event. Newspapers reported it as a lynching, but they also began to use the term “lynch laws,” which would become the defining phrase for lynchings in America.⁵⁹ Following the Vicksburg lynching, the Civil War and the Reconstruction eras were two crucial phases in the formation of lynch laws and its association with African Americans. It was during these times that mob violence and lynching became more rampant. Slaveholders saw it as part of their right to lynch their unruly slaves, just as it was lawful to kill an aggressive dog or wild animal.⁶⁰ Following the Confederacy’s surrender, Southerners used lynching and riots as a justification for protecting against the “Negro Rule” that was bound to result from freeing the slaves.⁶¹ African Americans were a threat to white civilization, and Southerners took it upon themselves to keep the “savage” former slaves in their place.⁶² White supremacy became the enforcing factor behind lynch laws.

Following Reconstruction, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the most violent and brutal period for lynch laws. Between 1880 and World War II around 4,700 people were lynched in America. African Americans made up 72% of the victims. This percentage was even higher in the south, where 80% of the lynchings occurred and 83% of these lynchings were of African Americans.⁶³ Lynching was most brutal in the south because the southerners were more adamant about enforcing their racial superiority. They were now living in an area with high populations of freed blacks with no way of keeping them suppressed. The new Jim Crow laws were only one way in which southerners attempted to keep blacks inferior in society. Even more effective

⁵⁹ Berg, *Popular Justice*, 29.

⁶⁰ Waldrep, *Lynching in America*, 61, 68.

⁶¹ Berg, *Popular Justice*, 69.

⁶² *Ibid*, 77.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 92.

was the fear that the lynch laws instilled. Lynchers would use the most brutal tactics in order to send the message to blacks that there was no room in society for the races to be equal. They would leave the bodies of victims in the streets with warning signs attached; there were spectacle lynching where “souvenir” postcards and poems were sold to on-lookers white men, women and children.⁶⁴ Lynch laws were an accepted part of life by the whites that instigated them, and a fearful reminder to blacks of the racial divides in society.

Southerners used all sorts of justifications for lynch laws, from murder to theft and even arson.⁶⁵ But the most common reason blacks were killed was because of assumed assaults of white women. It was the duty of the white southern gentleman to preserve and protect the purity of white women.⁶⁶ Chastity was a major component to their title as true women, without which their honor as a lady would be removed. Black men were viewed as “dangerous predators,” rapists by nature who were “mad after white women.”⁶⁷ The only way to protect a woman and her name as a lady was by killing the offenders. Lynching itself was never seen as a crime because it was a way to punish the real criminals, the rapists. Black men were normally the ones lynched because, as one anonymous writer states, “it is almost always committed by Negroes, and Negroes of the lowest order” because they were more “particularly given to the odious crime.”⁶⁸ It was seen as a part of their nature as African Americans to commit such

⁶⁴ Mia Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009), 142.

⁶⁵ Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice*, 195.

⁶⁶ Berg, *Popular Justice*, 97.

⁶⁷ Glenn, *Unequal Freedom*, 115; Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice*, 71.

⁶⁸ “Georgia,” New York Times, September 16, 1897, sourced from Waldrep, *Lynching in America*, 6.

offenses. Society did not recognize them as gentlemen; they were savages with an uncontrollable desire for white women.⁶⁹

White men were rarely charged with assault or lynched because society's perception of them was they were morally strong and honorable. Newspapers would often color their headlines to emphasize this point. The *Nashville Banner* reported on assaults committed by black men and would use statements like, "Another outrage," "Another Rape *Committed* by a Negro," and "Mrs. Cowgill *attacked*...by an unknown Negro."⁷⁰ However the headlines changed when it was about a white man. Instead of using adjectives like 'attacked' and 'committed' they used 'accused' and 'charged' that implied the innocence of the white man in question.⁷¹ Based on their race alone white men were able to get away with the same crime they were killing blacks for. The papers made lynching appear just as the white man wanted it to be: a punishment for a black man's sexual attacks on white women.⁷²

Just as the press fueled the fire for lynch laws, so too did the church in the South. Many churches did not recognize the issue at all; they did not want to insult the white men committing the crimes. These were the same men who also attended church on Sundays.⁷³ In her autobiography, Wells laments that "American Christians were too busy saving the souls of white Christians from burning in hell-fire to save the lives of black ones from present burning in fires kindled by white Christians."⁷⁴ The church leaders were perpetuating the problem; not only by refusing to help put an end to

⁶⁹ Berg, *Popular Justice*, 98

⁷⁰ Feimster, *Southern Horrors*, 93.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform: 1880-1930*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001,) 82.

⁷³ Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice*, 154-55.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 155.

lynching, but also by supporting the belief that black men were at fault. In his sermon, Bishop Fitzgerald preached, “Those who condemn lynching show no sympathy for the white woman in the case.”⁷⁵ Bishop Fitzgerald immediately blamed the African American man, not taking into account the woman’s consent. It was the influential role of church officials such as Bishop Fitzgerald that prolonged the belief that any interaction between a black man and a white woman was assault.

As much as white men wanted it to be believed that lynching was about bringing rapists to justice, it was in fact a very racialized event. As historian Mia Bay stated, it was not about protecting against rape, but instead about protecting white supremacy.⁷⁶ White men, like the anonymous author of the *New York Times* article, *Georgia*, tried to convince people that lynching was a justified crime that took the “upmost care to identify the criminal” and that any man of any race would be hanged for assaulting a woman.⁷⁷ However this was not the case. The vast majority of the people being killed were African American, as statistics have shown, and they were killed whether they were actually guilty of the crime or completely innocent. Lynchers looked for any excuse to kill black men, even charging an illiterate man with assault for asking a white woman to read a letter for him.⁷⁸ Lynchers liked to act first instead of making sure they had the right man, which resulted in many unnecessary deaths. If a white man was charged with rape, it was hardly ever acted upon by the justice system. Instead it almost

⁷⁵ Ibid, 193.

⁷⁶ Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely*, 127.

⁷⁷ “Georgia,” *New York Times*, September 16, 1897, sourced from Waldrep, *Lynching in America*, 6.

⁷⁸ Berg, *Popular Justice*, 98.

always turned out he was innocent of the crimes charged.⁷⁹ When it was a black man, he was always guilty until proven innocent.

The refusal to extend the same protections against assault to African American women was further proof of the racialized ideals of the lynch laws. Black women were not seen as worthy of being protected. Any attack that did occur was overlooked.⁸⁰ American abolitionist George Bourne writes in his book, *Slavery Illustrated in its Effects Upon Women and Domestic Society*, “the forceful defilement of a woman constitutes a flagitious transgression against which the divine revelation denounces its solemn condemnation...Nevertheless, in reference to the colored woman, the mandates of God are totally abrogated, and the laws of our country virtually sanctify the crime.”⁸¹ A white man could assault a black woman and face no repercussions. Ida B. Wells depicts one such story where the case was dropped because of the girl’s race: “A white man was in...jail for raping eight-year-old Maggie Reese, an Afro-American girl. He was not harmed... The outrage upon helpless childhood needed no avenging in this case; she was black.”⁸² Just as black women were excluded from true womanhood, they were refused the same protections of a lady. This left them vulnerable to the assault of white men, who knew they would never be arrested.

As an investigative journalist during one of the most violent eras of lynch law, Ida B. Wells put herself in danger every time she wrote about the horrors of lynching. Yet amid the threats and destruction of her property, she did not stop writing. Wells not

⁷⁹ Feimster, *Southern Horrors*, 94.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 94 and 103.

⁸¹ George Bourne, *Slavery Illustrated in its Effects Upon Women and Domestic Society* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1837), 48, accessed at <https://archive.org/stream/slaveryillustrat00bour#page/n13/mode/2up>, date accessed: February 17, 2015.

⁸² Wells-Barnett, *Southern Horrors*, under The White and Black of it.

only wrote her pamphlets to provide evidence of the falsehoods supporting lynching, but she also wanted to disprove the stereotypes society placed upon African Americans. Her journals and pamphlets refuted the charges that black men were rapists by nature, and provided evidence that further supported her radical viewpoints. Wells fearlessly condemned lynchers and the racist standards of the lynch laws, going so far as to slander their name as gentlemen. It was because of women like Ida B. Wells that the anti-lynching movement gained strength in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Anti-Lynching and True Black Womanhood

Wells was one of the first activists in the anti-lynching campaign, and one of the most outspoken. Her campaign began to protect black men from the racist brutality of lynching. However, in her efforts to end lynch laws Wells also promoted the true womanhood of African American women. By playing a key role in the anti-lynching campaign black women were performing the lady's role of caring for and protecting her family household. By disproving white women's chastity and exposing the fallacy of white men's chivalry, Wells suggested that African American women were just as capable of womanhood as their white counterparts.

The ladies of the anti-lynching movement were looking for equality among their gender that had so long been denied to them. Along with leading activist Ida B. Wells, they wanted to prove their worth as true women as well as the progressives they were. This was an era of great change, with the push for women in the public sphere. However these reformist movements were strictly racially divided. Wells and the other

anti-lynching activists first had to display their qualities as true women in order to be considered worthy to fight for women's rights.

Women leading the anti-lynching campaign protested the lynch laws as a way to protect their husbands, brothers, fathers, and neighbors from being punished for a crime they did not commit. Preserving their family was extremely important, especially for a woman whose main objective was caring for the home and family. One of the reasons black women were excluded from womanhood was because the traditional family lifestyle was not a reality for African Americans. Many black families strived for a stable idealized middle class family home, where the father worked and the mother cared for the house.⁸³ However, slavery and lynching had torn apart the home by murdering so many men, leaving women as sole providers in many cases. Because they were taking on the roles of their husbands, black women could not devote as much time to their domestic duties as wives and mothers. They actively exercised these ideals, however, by participating in the anti-lynching movement. Black women were fighting to protect black men from being killed in lynch mobs, which was an extension of their womanly duties to protect and preserve their homes. As a result they were promoting their chances to have a stable household like a white family, where they would be able to fulfill their roles as mothers and wives.

One of the most successful approaches for women in the anti-lynching movement was through their participation in women's groups. Ida B. Wells was one of the first to instigate such civic clubs for black women with the formation of the

⁸³ Glenn, *Unequal Freedom*, 100.

Women's Era Club in Boston in 1893.⁸⁴ The Women's Era Club promoted racial uplift for African Americans by encouraging the "politics of respectability" among black women as well as avidly supporting the anti-lynching movement.⁸⁵ It was their goal to prove the dignity of black women, emphasizing domesticity and morality among club members, and thus strengthening their claim for broadening the title of true womanhood to all races.⁸⁶ Many white men and women at the time linked what they saw as the "black whore" to the "black rapist." In society's eyes African American women were far removed from any characteristics of a lady, which included a woman's influence on the family. Without a respectable woman to guide them, black men did not grow up to be gentlemen but aggressors.⁸⁷ It was the goal of clubs like the Women's Era Club to dispel these beliefs, both about black men and women. They endeavored to prove the lady-like nature of black women and that not all black men were rapists and deserving of lynching. By participating in the anti-lynching movement, clubwomen were promoting these ideals. In a letter to Mrs. Ormiston Chant, club secretary Florida Ruffin Ridley writes:

"-[I]n the interest of justice, for the good name of our country, we solemnly raise our voices against the horrible crimes of lynch law as practiced in the South...We here solemnly deny that black men are the foul fiends they are pictured...We know positively of case after case where innocent men have died horrible deaths...We know positively of cases where black men have been lynched for white men's crimes...All that we ask for is justice.-"⁸⁸

The Women's Era Club wished to bring the truth forward about African Americans, and show the stereotypes of black men and women to be false. Their support of anti-

⁸⁴ Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice*, xix.

⁸⁵ Feimster, *Southern Horrors*, 114-115.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 114.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 115.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice*, 199.

lynching campaigns like that of Ida B. Wells further validated Wells' argument that black men were not the rapists society believed them to be, and that the black women who protected these men were equally true women.

As one of the leading crusaders for the anti-lynching campaign, Ida B. Wells was not afraid to speak her mind. Wells took bold action against the white men purporting the lynch laws and their continued validation of lynching as a way to protect women's honor.⁸⁹ Her anti-lynching pamphlets *Southern Horrors* and the *Red Record* provide multiple examples of white women who instigated relationships with black men instead of the other way around as it was always perceived to be. The *Red Record* states, -"In numerous instances where colored men have been lynched on the charge of rape, it was positively known at the time of lynching, and indisputably proven after the victim's death, that the relationship sustained between the man and woman was voluntary and clandestine."⁹⁰ She claims that there were many white women who would eagerly marry a black man had it not ostracized them from society.⁹¹ Wells depicts the story of Mrs. J.S. Underwood, who admitted to having an affair with a black man and then covering it up to protect her reputation. Only after the man was lynched for alleged assault did Mrs. Underwood confess the truth: "He had a strange fascination for me, and I invited him to call on me. He called, bringing chestnuts and candy for the children. By this means we got them to leave us alone in the room. Then I sat on his lap. He made a proposal to me and I readily consented... I could not have resisted, and had no desire to

⁸⁹ Ibid, 90.

⁹⁰ Wells-Barnett, *The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States* (1895), date accessed March 9, 2015, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14977/14977-h/14977-h.htm>, under The Case Stated.

⁹¹ Ida Wells-Barnett, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law and all its Phases* (New York Age Print, 1892), under The Offense, date accessed March 9, 2015, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14975/14975-h/14975-h.htm>.

resist.”⁹² The image that black men were rapists and constantly attacking white women was entirely false, but they were being lynched nonetheless because they “succumbed to the smiles of a white woman.”⁹³ By showing that a vast majority of the time white women were the instigators of the relationships, Wells actively disproved the societal norm that white women are always pure and honorable. As chastity was one of the key components of true womanhood, by showing the lack of virtue in white women Wells was also arguing that whiteness does not automatically mark a woman as virtuous.

As a result of Wells’ argument against the ladylike nature of white women, she was also supporting the belief that black women had the qualifications of true womanhood. In a letter to the *Memphis Scimitar* she writes:

“-Our race is no exception to the rest of humanity, in its susceptibility to weakness, nor is it any consolation for us to know that...the aristocratic circles of our own country furnish parallel examples of immorality. We only wish to be given the same credit for our virtues that others receive, and once the idea gains ground that worth is respected, from whatever source it may originate, a great incentive to good moral will have been given.”⁹⁴

Wells admitted that there were immoral African American women, but just as there were virtuous women of her race. Her anti-lynching pamphlets showed that the same was true for white women as well: There were some who were ladies and some who were not. Wells herself was an example that moral and ladylike African American women were not impossible. In her autobiography she explained how her mother raised her to live a “spotless and moral” life.⁹⁵ In a culture that automatically viewed black women as impure Wells was always disproving people. White men in particular.

⁹² Ibid, under the Black and White of It.

⁹³ Ibid, under The Offense.

⁹⁴ Wells-Barnett, “Our Women,” sourced in Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*, 186.

⁹⁵ Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice*, 44.

She spoke of wanting them to know that “virtue was not at all a matter of the section in which one lived,” but was a quality all women could possess.⁹⁶ She was taught by her mother to be chaste and to guard her good name at all costs. She raised her children in the same fashion. A letter to her daughters reveals that Wells wanted them to be “shining examples of noble and true womanhood” for the rest of society to see.⁹⁷ “Virtue knows no color line,” she claimed. Just as there were some white women who were unworthy of true womanhood, so too were there African American women who were more virtuous and ladylike than their white counterparts.⁹⁸

Claiming that African American women could not perform the same tasks as a lady completely ignored the facts that black women had very similar roles to white women. In her article, “The Model Woman,” Wells encouraged African American girls to develop the same skills and manners white girls were taught. The “typical southern girl,” according to Wells, was modest and refined in her manners, who “guarded her virtue and good name” above all else.⁹⁹ She believed in encouraging a “thoughtful, pure, and noble womanhood” among black women, instead of one of “idleness.”¹⁰⁰ A lady was to know how to “keep house” and all the domestic skills that came with running a household, and above all she was to be an encouragement to her husband and sons and help shape them into a noble and honest men.¹⁰¹ In these qualities, Wells was promoting the same standards for black women that were necessary for true women. She believed all women had the potential to be a lady, especially African Americans.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ida B. Wells Papers, [Box 8, Folder 9], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

⁹⁸ Wells-Barnett, *The Red Record*, under The Case Stated.

⁹⁹ Wells-Barnett, “The Model Woman: A Pen Picture of the Typical Southern Girl,” *New York Freeman*, reprinted from *Chattanooga Justice*, (February 18, 1888), sourced from Wells-Barnett, *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*, 188-189.

¹⁰⁰ Ida B. Wells-Barnett, “Women’s Mission,” *New York Freeman*, (December 26, 1885), sourced from Wells-Barnett, *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*, 180.

¹⁰¹ Wells-Barnett, “The Model Women,” sourced from Wells-Barnett, *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*, 188-189.

Wells and the other women leading the anti-lynching movement were chief examples of true womanhood through their roles in protecting their families from the racist violence of the lynch laws. Furthermore, by proving the fallacy of white women's purity Wells made it possible for society to see the lady within the black woman.

In her effort to oppose the lynch laws and support true womanhood for all women, Ida B. Wells worked to disprove the main excuse white men used for lynching: the protection of women. Chivalry was what inspired lynching because the rape of women needed to be punished. And yet this chivalry did not extend beyond a select group of women. Wells commented in the *Red Record* that the Christian women who moved south after the war to help educate the newly freed slaves were ostracized because of their choice to help African Americans. Wells states, "The peculiar sensitiveness of the southern white men for women, never shed its protecting influence about them. No friendly word from their own race cheered them in their work; No chivalrous white man doffed his hat in honor or respect."¹⁰² Simply because these women chose to work in a field white men did not like, they were viewed as outcasts instead of the ladies that they were. The rape of black women was also completely ignored by "chivalrous men." In fact, many men considered African American women a "sexual proving ground" for those too "gentlemanly" to disturb the finer sensibilities of higher-class women."¹⁰³ Assault on black women was not viewed in the same negative light as assault on whites, and so it was not believed necessary to protect them from it. Wells, however, did not agree with these sentiments. "True chivalry respects all womanhood...and the chivalry which depends upon complexion of skin and texture of

¹⁰² Wells-Barnett, *The Red Record*, under the Case Stated.

¹⁰³ Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 109.

hair can command no honest respect.”¹⁰⁴ Because the lynchers refused to acknowledge a large number of women in their chivalrous actions not only were these actions fallacious but the institution they supported was as well. The lynch laws were based upon erroneous values of honor and chivalry, and by exposing the truth of this system Ida B. Wells was not only disproving the lynch laws themselves but in extension the societal norm that only white women were worthy of the honors and dignities of true womanhood.

Ida B. Wells never stopped fighting for African American rights. From her home in Chicago she continued to write and speak on the subject, publishing such articles as “How Enfranchisement Stops Lynching.”¹⁰⁵ She took a brief absence from her career when her children were born, believing in the importance of a mother’s presence in the home for young children, but picked up writing once again when her children were grown. Wells was a founder and co-founder for many major clubs and organizations that focused on the advancement of African Americans, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Association of Colored Women’s Club (NACWC), as well as the Alpha Suffrage Club, the first black women’s suffrage organization.¹⁰⁶ Her work paved the way for future generations of African Americans seeking equality.

While Wells never lived to see the end of lynch laws, passing away in 1931, her work in the anti-lynching movement was invaluable. Open support for lynching began to fade in the decades following World War II, but it did not disappear entirely.¹⁰⁷ Racial

¹⁰⁴ Wells-Barnett, *The Red Record*, under The Case Stated.

¹⁰⁵ Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice*, xxviii.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, xxviii, 327.

¹⁰⁷ Berg, *Popular Justice*, 169.

tension continued as many white people held firm to their belief in an inferior African American race. This mentality would sometimes result in violence, such as the murders of Emmitt Till and Willie Earle, both of whom were killed by racist men who still believed in the “justice” of lynching.¹⁰⁸ The Civil Rights era did help in putting a stop to continued acts of racial violence, as did the formal apology that Congress issued in 2005 that lamented the horrors of lynching and vowed, “to ensure these tragedies will be neither forgotten nor repeated.”¹⁰⁹ It gives hope to African Americans across America that the events of the past may finally be laid to rest and an era of gender and racial equality can begin.

Conclusion

For a woman in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was no greater aspiration than to be a lady of the finest quality. This required possessing the necessary ideals of purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity, all of which made a true woman. However, womanhood was very exclusive, only middle- and upper-class white women were capable of achieving it. African American women were never considered proficient in the skills of a lady. Even after emancipation, they were still viewed as only servants and not women who could run their own households and families. True womanhood was denied to black women because the only images society saw of them were the devoted “Mammie” and the lustful “Jezebel” both of which were outside the realm of womanhood.

The lynch laws that were instigated in the South added a new and more violent form of discrimination towards African Americans. Black men were being killed for

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 171-173.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 187.

little to no reason, and society condoned it. Lynchers quickly justified their actions by claiming black men were assaulting white women, and as chivalrous men they needed to protect a woman's virtue. However this reasoning never held true when it was black women who were being raped by white men. The lynch laws continued the idea that began during slavery, that African American women were inferior and could not possess the same honor and dignities of a lady. A true woman was pure and cared for domestic duties, both things that were denied to black women. Exclusion from the category of a lady meant that the assault of a black woman was no major offense and went virtually unnoticed by society.

Anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells, however, thought otherwise. As a leading advocate to end lynch laws, Wells believed in equality for African Americans. As an investigative journalist she wrote multiple pamphlets and delivered speeches promoting her stance that lynching killed innocent men. She bravely argued, "Nobody in this section of the country believes the old thread-bare lie that Negro men rape white women."¹¹⁰ The black and white of it was that lynch mobs killed African Americans in order to perpetuate white supremacy. White men were doing the very thing they killed blacks for and assaulting black women. Because of their race, the white men were never convicted.

Ida B. Wells used her anti-lynching movement as a way to promote true black womanhood. She subverted the long held belief that all white women were chaste and pure ladies by exposing the voluntary relationships many white women had with black men. Wells also argued that a woman's race should not automatically justify their worth

¹¹⁰ Wells-Barnett, *Southern Horrors*, under The Offense.

as true women, as shown in the not so virtuous actions of some white women, and the often overlooked morally upright black women. Wells herself lived an honorable and chaste lifestyle, encouraging both her own children and young African American girls to pursue the same. By striving to live by the standards of true womanhood that society believed her impossible of achieving, Wells destroyed the racialized stereotype altogether. Her involvement in the anti-lynching campaign was the first step in removing this racial barrier. By divulging the lack of ladylike behavior in white women, Wells paved the way for African American women to prove their worth as true women. She not only promoted freedom for black men in her anti-lynching campaign, but black women as well. Removing the foundation that lynching was an act of chivalry not only benefitted African American men, but also the African American woman whom the chivalrous acts of white men did not protect. Ida B. Wells was a pioneer for the end of racialized violence as well as gender inequality. Her mission to protect innocent black men from a death they did not deserve simultaneously removed the social barriers for black women, and encouraged a future of further anti-lynching activism and a united women's movement.

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