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ENGL 3373: World War 1

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“Here He Is, Sir” Poster Analysis

The propaganda poster I've chosen to study, part of a campaign for naval recruitment, features an image of the avuncular Uncle Sam clasping a young woman on the back as she leads her male companion towards enlistment. The caption, "Here he is, Sir" is emblazoned underneath the image, and the entire poster is framed by the phrase "U.S. Navy: We need him and you too! Navy Recruiting Station." The image of a woman shaking Uncle Sam's hand as she leads her male friend/relative to enlist in the navy creates a powerfully gendered rhetoric of obligation and responsibility which targets both male and female viewers. This poster presents an insightful look into how gender was perceived during the war.

This poster was drawn by Charles Dana Gibson, an American illustrator famous for his portrayal of dominant femininity. The “Gibson Girls”, as they were called, epitomized a uniquely modern American standard of beauty: adventurous, independent, high society girls who were as disdainful of male desire as they could be without overtly threatening or challenging sexual social mores. The Gibson girl is a paradoxical figure of femininity; despite her empowered independence from traditional gender stereotypes, the Gibson girl is still objectified and rendered harmless by the society around her. The artist obviously had a very complex relationship with gender, one which shines through in this propaganda poster. The female figure in the poster bears many marked similarities to the Gibson Girl, including her statuesque figure, distinctively piled hairstyle, and delicate facial features. However, the trademark signifiers of independence and empowerment have been carefully suppressed in the poster: the woman's radical hairstyle is

concealed beneath a matronly hat, her shapely body covered beneath a modest brown coat, and her face is contorted into an expression of helpless pity. Despite her controlling grip on the younger male figure in the poster, the subservient posture and pleading gaze of the woman further reinforce her willing dependence on Uncle Sam. The subversion of such a powerful symbol of individuality under the direction of patriotism valorizes the sacrifice of individual liberty being made to the state by the enlisting men and their supporters.

This poster also reaches out to male viewers through the aforementioned gendered rhetoric of shame. While the man in the poster is the picture of strapping American masculinity, he is belittled and rendered subservient within the context of the poster. Compared to the powerful, dynamic figure of Uncle Sam, the man in this poster seems very meek and humble; his hat is off, his posture is shifted slightly forward in supplication, and his arm is inextricably bound up in the dominating grip of the female figure, who herself is made subservient to Uncle Sam through his possessive gaze and grasp. The artwork and text objectify the male figure, casting him as a commodity which must be herded into patriotic service. The "Here he is" caption underlines the ignominy of the transaction, as the man is robbed of all agency in his enlistment. And while the female figure receives hearty thanks from Uncle Sam, the man in the poster is left out in the cold from the exchange. While the poster seems to be primarily aimed at female viewers, the message for men is clear: enlist now, before you suffer the shame of being dragged to the recruiting office by a more patriotic female relation.

While drawing the figure of Uncle Sam in his poster, Gibson faced the challenge of representing the government sponsoring their work. While foreign nations could be reduced to caricatures and stereotypes, i.e. the barbaric Hun or the victimized Belgium, it took a more nuanced approach to properly represent the homeland. Nations had to represent themselves on

the home front as both powerful aggressors which could handily defeat their enemies, and as virtuous protectors whose moral justification for war was unquestionable. Gibson uses the avuncular figure of Uncle Sam to synthesize these competing desires, positioning Sam as a stern familial figure, whose aggression is tempered by the compassionate bonds of family. Gibson places Uncle Sam as the dominant figure in the poster. His posture is dynamic, his leg crooked forward in action, his stern gaze dominating its female recipient into a submissive bow. One hand pulls the female down into a firm handshake; the other clutches possessively around the woman's shoulders. Clearly, Sam is a figure of great potency and power, not to be trifled with. However, for all his dominance in the picture, Uncle Sam is a strongly sympathetic character. His expression, while grave, also communicates empathy and understanding for the plight of the woman; his eyes half-closed in sympathetic pain, his mouth crooked slightly downward in distaste for the unpleasant duty he must perform. And while his physical motions are aggressive, they are also supportive and generally positive. For her efforts, the woman receives a warm handshake and a firm pat on the back, typically avuncular gestures that convey both familiarity and support. It's worth noting that the henpecked male figure has been entirely cut out of the exchange; Uncle Sam doesn't even spare him a glance. The powerful grace with which Gibson's Uncle Sam handles this delicate situation (from the woman's perspective, at least) is presented as a typical government response to the process of enlistment. Women viewing this poster might have felt more comfortable about the concept of enlistment, while men viewing the poster might have been compelled to seek out the avuncular attention of Uncle Sam for themselves, without resorting to a female intermediary.

This particular propaganda poster illustrates the impact World War I had on perceptions of gender, addressing both female and male viewers in a powerfully gendered plea for support.

The majority of naval recruitment posters were directed at male viewers; to target a specifically female audience was an unconventional tactic. By placing the responsibility for enlistment on female as well as male viewers, the Navy was able to obtain more diverse enlistment subjects, as well as present a convincing new argument for male recruitment: join up, or face the shame of being dragged to the recruitment office. In both cases, however, gender is portrayed as subservient to patriotism. By subverting the image of female independence, and subjecting American masculinity to the benevolent domination of patriotism, Gibson illustrates quite clearly how the war subjected both genders beneath its controlling presence. Masculinity and femininity were radically redefined during World War I, but these redefinitions were dominated and haunted by the war's constant specter. As "Here He Is, Sir" demonstrates, the concerns of the individual during wartime are necessarily overridden by the concerns of the state: it is the duty of every patriotic citizen, according to Gibson, to accept this subjugation and sacrifice their individuality to the overriding identity of a nation at war.