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World War I

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The Greatest Mother in the World

Gender plays an enormous role in reading war posters, especially those from the World War I era. A.E. Foringer's poster, "The Greatest Mother in the World," created in 1918 for the American Red Cross, is no different. It, too, employs gender to make a point and encourage men and women to join the war effort. However, this poster puts a twist on standard gender roles, showing the woman as powerful and the man as weak. Though the poster does employ Christian imagery that validates the man's weakness and glorifies his service, this poster caused some discomfort among its audiences. Nevertheless, it remained extremely popular and was printed by the Red Cross to recruit nurses throughout both World Wars. By simultaneously subverting the standard gender roles and using Christian imagery, "The Greatest Mother in the World" glorifies both male and female service to the war effort in an unconventional manner.

Posters created during World War I tended to follow very strict rules regarding gender, in order to adequately glorify the act of fighting, demonize the enemy, and convey the helplessness of women and children. As part of these rules, posters generally refrained from showing wounded men. According to Pearl James, "Portraying male wounds ran the risk of immobilizing male viewers, who might identify with the male victim and see him...as a projected version of what might happen to them on the battlefield," (288). Instead, soldiers get depicted as full of morale, energetic, and thrilled to be serving their country.

Women, too, had standard roles in posters. James lists several of the most common depictions of women, including the Amazon Warrior, portraying women as “physically powerful, entirely self-sufficient, austere, impartial, and dispassionate,” (278); the Damsel in Distress, a picture of the victimized woman (283); the Christy Girl, acting as a “commodified coquette,” (288); and the Woman Worker, showing women both in traditional domestic roles, and as assisting the war effort in new, more modern ways (291). Though the posters showed women in a greater variety of roles than men, depictions of women very rarely departed from these four basic forms.

“The Greatest Mother in the World,” however, diverges from the standard gender roles portrayed in posters. Beginning with the woman, she appears at first glance to fit into the Woman Worker category. She is obviously a Red Cross Nurse who appears to be holding a bundle of supplies and looking wistfully off into the distance. However, there is a great deal more to this picture than a passing glance reveals. Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the bundle actually a wounded soldier, wrapped up in a stretcher. With this realization, the allegorical nature of the poster becomes a bit clearer. The book *Persuasive Images* describes this poster as “The image of a serene giant Pieta,” (Lewis 60) the Pieta being a statue by Michelangelo of the Blessed Virgin Mary holding the body of her crucified son, Christ. Adding to the Pieta imagery, there is even the Red Cross emblem in the background, an image that can be viewed as the cross of Christ. The woman in this poster is far more than a lowly Red Cross nurse fulfilling the Woman Worker stereotype. Here, the nurse takes on the role of Mary, mother of Jesus, the woman that Christians across the globe consider to be the greatest mother in the world.

By depicting the nurse as a Marian figure, this poster’s call to action differs from most war posters. It does not fully employ any of James’ four female paradigms for war posters. Yes,

it does show a woman working outside the home; however, the nurse as a woman worker is not the main takeaway of the poster. The real takeaway is in this poster's glorification of nursing, which says that nurses who care for wounded soldiers are on par with the holy benevolence of Mary. "The Greatest Mother in the World" effectively encourages women to serve as nurses, promising them a sacred experience.

Of course, this poster with its modern-day depiction of the Pieta has important implications for men as well. If one views the poster without knowledge of its connection to the Pieta, the viewer will see nothing more than an utterly helpless and seriously wounded man. Bandages cover his forehead, eyes, and hands, protecting wounds that may have come from exposure to poison gas. The man in this poster is reduced from the strength of manhood to being cradled in a nurse's arms like an infant. This view of a soldier completely contradicts the usual portrayal of men in war posters. According to Meg Albrinck's article "Humanitarians and He-Men," a man in war posters was supposed to be "plucky, genial, and determined," always exhibiting courage, and resolutely facing whatever challenge came his way (313). In short, he was to be the epitome of manliness. In "The Greatest Mother in the World," the War has stripped the soldier of his manliness.

This picture of manhood defeated would fail as a recruitment technique were it not for the allusion to the Pieta. As such, even though the man is wounded and very possibly dying, "The Greatest Mother in the World" valorizes his act of fighting as a good and beautiful thing. By placing him in the mother's arms, the soldier becomes a Christ figure. The poster implies that his act of service is sacred, and praise-worthy, something to be revered by the rest of the nation. It speaks to men who have a romanticized hero complex, those who desire to fight for goodness and be remembered long after their deaths. In this way, "The Greatest Mother in the World"

really is no different than the bulk of World War I posters: it lionizes the soldier for his act of courage and shows a positive effect of fighting.

Though the Pieta imagery validates the poster and keeps it from completely contradicting the messages proclaimed by other war posters, *Persuasive Images* states that some people read this poster as “a chilling image of female power and masculine helplessness,” (Lewis 60). The poster certainly conveys its message in an unconventional way. People were not used to seeing wounded men being cared for by a larger-than-life woman in war posters. The fact that people reacted in this manner is not altogether surprising, because, in the turmoil of a war, people desire stability, not upheaval. Instead of sticking to the norm, “The Greatest Mother in the World” uses a somewhat controversial method of proclaiming its message.

Perhaps “The Greatest Mother in the World” was a successful poster precisely because it unnerved people. After seeing hundreds of posters that kept with the standard gender portrayals, this poster would make a person stop and think. Ultimately, because of the Pieta imagery, “The Greatest Mother in the World” still glorifies the service of men and women in the War. However, by using unconventional gender imagery, this poster stands out as a particularly interesting and impactful piece of World War I propaganda.

Works Cited

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