

*“What Can a Woman Do?
A Woman’s Role in the late 1800s and early 1900s”*

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For my sixteenth birthday, my aunt gave me a copy of Mrs. M. L. Rayne’s book, *What Can a Woman Do?*, which traces various career options that were open to women in the 1880s. I found it humorous on the first reading—I was primarily struck by the notion that character can be determined by physical features such as “eyes that indicate remarkable intelligence” and a noble brow. The book was fascinating, however; it led me to realize that there were many more career options open to women at that time period than I had previously realized.

But this collection is not simply about what careers were open to women at that time period. Instead, it focuses on their lives—how they lived, what they read, what was expected of them. Some of the books are written by authors who lived in this time period; others are written by authors trying to recreate it. In at least one instance (Alice Cary), the book was chosen due to its author rather than its content. Yet despite all these differences, the books give an overall picture of life for women at that point in history.

I have tried to include a variety of viewpoints as to what a woman’s role actually was. I didn’t want all the books in this collection to be from the perspective that a woman’s place was in the home, but by the same token, I didn’t want them all to be from a feminist perspective. My hope is that this collection of books presents an overview of what women thought about their place in society.

I’ve garnered these books from various sources over the years. Some were books that belonged to my mother or other family members, while others were found at auction sales and yard sales. Since coming to MSU, I’ve added to my collection (and, actually, to the sheer total of books that I own) via the MSU Library discard sale and Curious Book Shop in downtown East Lansing. Still others of my collection were given to me by my aunt, who collects vintage clothing and antiques. I tend to buy used books, since they are usually much cheaper—I believe that only three of the books on this list were new when they came into my possession.

Recently, I had my nineteenth birthday. Knowing about my collection (and that the original volume she gave me was responsible for it), my aunt gave me another book—this time it was *The Ideal Woman*, a medical and moral guide for women from 1901. In the short time that I’ve owned it, I once again have been struck by how much the concept of a woman’s role has changed over time—in some aspects for the better, in some for the worse. No doubt many other books that I will acquire in the future will evoke the same feelings.