**The Southern Lady and Belle: The Companion to**

**Southern Literature by Joseph Flora and Lucinda**

**MacKethan**

2-3 minutes

In their book *The Companion to Southern Literature*, Joseph Flora and Lucinda

MacKethan describe the Southern lady and the younger Southern belle, social types that

exuded the traditional characteristics to which many white Southerners expected girls to

aspire for much of the twentieth century.

Ideally a patrician, privileged white woman, she served her husband, bending to him in all

matters; she was maternal, bearing children regularly and caring for them lovingly; she

possessed great skill in the domestic sphere, running kitchen and nursery, overseeing the

household in all areas, dispensing medicine, always hospitable. Most important, perhaps,

she was the moral center of the household, pious, self-effacing, and kind. An expert with

the needle, she could also play a musical instrument and sing melodies for the family. She

was essential to the patriarchy, assuring well-brought-up children, a well-run home, and

complete comfort for her husband...1

Following the Civil War, [the] vision of a plantation South took on mythic proportions as

southerners grew defensive and nostalgic about the Old South. In particular, the southern

woman of the Old South was presented, through the image of the southern lady, as the

ideal of nineteenth-century womanhood.

. . . A marble figure on a pedestal, she was static. A more appealing character, in this

idealized vision of the South, was the southern belle, the younger, unmarried, and hence

incomplete version of the southern lady . . . .

If trained right, the belle had, by her early teen years, already acquired most of the

makings of the southern lady: she was beautiful or potentially beautiful, graceful,

charming, virtuous, loyal to family, submissive to father, in need of men’s protection, yet

resourceful and brave when unusual circumstances called on her to be. But even in her

late teens, she might not yet have perfected self- sacrifice and calm self-possession.

These characteristics would come, or must come, once she married—and marrying was

supposed to be her goal in life.2

**Answer the following questions concerning this passage using the ACE strategy.**

1. What are the characteristics of a southern lady?

**A southern lady would be beautiful, subject to her husband, smart and industrious, a care taker for the household, overseer of all the domestic life, and the moral center of the family.**

1. What are the expectations of a southern belle?

**The southern belle would be beautiful or potentially beautiful, able to do most of the tasks of a southern lady by teenage hood, virtuous, loyal to the family, submissive to her father, and in need of male protection but brave and capable if it were needed.**

1. Are any of the expectations of a southern lady or belle alive in our culture today? Explain your answer.

**There are several of these expectations alive today. In many places around the nation women are still expected to be beautiful or potentially beautiful, virtuous, submissive to men, in need of male protection, and overseer of the home-especially cooking, cleaning, and children.**

**Reflections on Poor White Women**

In her memoir about growing up poor in South Carolina in the 1960s, Dorothy Allison offers this reflection on the women in her family:

Let me tell you about what I have never been allowed to be. Beautiful and female… I was born trash in a land where the people all believe themselves natural aristocrats. Ask any white southerner. They’ll take you back two generations, say, “Yeah, we had a plantation.” The hell we did.

I have no memories that can be bent so easily. I know where I come from, and it is not that part of the world. My family has a history of death and murder, grief and denial, rage and ugliness—the women of my family most of all.

The women of my family were measured, manlike, sexless, bearers of babies, burdens, and contempt. My family? The women of my family? We are the ones in all those photos taken at mining disasters, floods, fires.   
We are the ones in the background with our mouths open, in print dresses or drawstring pants and collarless smocks, ugly and old and exhausted. Solid, stolid, wide-hipped baby machines. We were all wide-hipped and predestined. Wide-faced meant stupid. Wide hands marked workhorses with dull hair and tired eyes, thumbing through magazines full of women so different from us they could have been another species.

1. Compare and contrast Allison’s description with the ideal of the southern belle/lady that you learned about in the previous section. What does Alison’s perspective add to your understanding of the ideals and realities of being a woman in the south in the 1960s?

**Allison describes the women she knew as plain or ugly “(manlike), sexless, bearers of babies, burdens and contempt.” They were “wide-hipped with wide faces that was seen as stupid, wide hands that marked a work horse, dull hair, and tired eyes.” This description is mostly in contrast to the beautiful, industrious, dainty house wife of the southern lady. The only likenesses are being women, motherhood, and being industrious. Allison’s perspective shows that to be a southern belle or lady, one needed to be born into prominent families or are married into one because poor women had to work hard and had no time or opportunity to take care of anything but the absolute necessary in life.**

1. How might the expectations and realities be the same and different for a woman in the 1930s?

**The expectations of women would have been much the same in the 1930s as they were in the 1960s, only stricter. Women would have been expected to adhere to the ideas of purity, motherhood, and family, but in the 30s would have been forced by society more urgently to adhere to the expectations. In the 60’s revolution was going on and people were casting off the expectations of church, chastity, and modesty.**

1. Of the two types of women presented in the two passages, which one is more free? How do you know or come to your conclusion?

**In reality, both of the women are free to make choices if they are willing to deal with the consequences of those choices, but neither of them are more or less free by society standards. The rich woman is trapped in the expectations of being a lady while the poor woman is trapped in the day to day grind of working for a living and scraping by. Neither woman is free to chase her dreams without forsaking family and friends.**