

By the early decades of the 19th century, Berend says, friendship and “mutual esteem” were no longer regarded as a sufficient foundation for marriage, as they had been by 17th-century Puritans. The evangelical movement of the 19th century changed that. Love—understood as God’s will—became the only legitimate basis for marriage.

Seeing love as a “spiritual union,” Berend explains, “enhanced the expectation . . . of finding completeness or wholeness” in marriage. But this exalted view of matrimony also risked putting it out of reach. “It became socially and personally acceptable not to marry,” Berend points out, “if marriage involved compromising one’s moral standards.” As Louisa May Alcott, the author of *Little Women* (1868–69), advised, “If love comes as it should come, accept it in God’s name and be worthy of His best blessing.

If it never comes, then in God’s name reject the shadow of it.”

Though less desirable than wedlock, spinsterhood was not deemed a terrible misfortune. It was rather a morally responsible alternative that let women stay true to their ideals and still fulfill God’s mandate to better the world. Love, says Berend, could be “directed toward missions other than marriage and family.” Having rejected their suitors because their feelings did not rise to the level of love, spinsters set out to become teachers, charity workers, and doctors.

Contrary to the interpretation of today’s feminists, Berend concludes, “female self-direction, in the world of 19th-century spinsters, was not an ultimate good but a stepping stone to a life of usefulness and service, a life in accordance with God’s purposes.” The spinsters aimed not for autonomy but salvation.

The Anatomy of Grade Inflation

“Grade Inflation: What’s Really behind All Those A’s?” by Lisa Birk, in *Harvard Education Letter* (Jan.–Feb. 2000), Gutman Library, 6 Appian Way, Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

It’s no secret that today’s teachers hand out more high grades than yesterday’s did. Though SAT scores haven’t significantly improved in recent decades, 39 percent of the students taking the SAT last year reported having an A average; in 1984, only 28 percent did. But what’s the underlying reason for the grade inflation? It’s not that teachers are simply going easy on the kids, contends Birk, a freelance writer based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It’s rather that they are using grades to do too many things.

“Teachers,” she says, “tend to give grades for many different reasons: to measure content mastery, to chart progress, to motivate students, and to provide information to a variety of audiences, from students to parents to college admissions boards.” As a result, the meaning of an A on a report card is murky: It could mean the student mastered all of the assigned material, or merely that the student tried hard—or something else entirely.

Teachers often use grades to reward effort, or to penalize lack of it, Birk notes. In a 1997 survey of teachers by H. Parker Blount of Georgia State University, 82 percent said they used such a carrot-and-stick approach. But stu-

dents and their parents may misinterpret an A or B as high achievement—and consequently not get the help they need, Birk points out. Grade inflation also masks the failure of many schools in high-poverty areas.

Is there a better alternative to grades? Under a pass/fail system, one teacher told Blount, most students would do only “the bare minimum to pass.” Narrative descriptions of students’ work, instead of grades, would enable teachers to offer more complex progress reports—but also would be very time consuming. “And, for better or worse,” Birk says, “college admissions boards and employers often prefer grades and numbers over narratives.”

Nevertheless, thanks to the standards-based reform movement, she notes, there is increasing pressure “to clarify exactly what grades mean.” She believes that the Boston Arts Academy, a pilot school in Boston, has a promising approach. “Twice a year, teachers evaluate student achievement with a grade and every other aspect of the learner with a narrative.” Students who try hard may not win A’s, but their effort is noted—and they and their parents find out where they really stand.