

The Cult of Domesticity

An Online Professional Development Seminar

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GOALS

- To deepen understanding of the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity
- To explore how the cult of domesticity both oppressed and empowered women
- To provide new materials and ideas to strengthen teaching

Framing Questions

1. How are the four cardinal virtues of “The Cult of True Womanhood”—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity—either exhibited, challenged, or both in our readings on domesticity?
2. What are some of the potential political and economic consequences of encouraging women to restrict themselves to the “domestic sphere” of home and hearth?
3. Was domesticity a fair price that women paid for security in mid-nineteenth century America? What would enter into a true “cost analysis” of the benefits and risks?



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1984-85

Southern Literature and American Literature

*Daughters of Time: Creating Woman's Voice in
Southern Story (1990)*

*The Dream of Arcady: Place and Time in
Southern Literature (1980)*

*A Guide to Scribbling Women. A Multi-Media
Presentation of American Women's Short
Stories (with James A. Miller) (1997)*

Conclusion: "A Man's Home: Rethinking the Public/Private Dichotomy in American Political Thought"

Susan E. Gallagher



The Cult of Domesticity in the Twentieth Century

<http://faculty.uml.edu/sgallagher/RPOldconclusion.htm>

Begin with a definition.

What was the Cult of domesticity?

Turn to Fanny Fern to tell us.

HOW HUSBANDS MAY RULE.

“Dear Mary,” said Harry — to his little wife, “I have a favor to ask of you. You have a friend whom I dislike very much, and who I am quite sure will make trouble between us. Will you give up Mrs. May for my sake, Mary?”

A slight shade of vexation crossed Mary's pretty face, as she said, “You are unreasonable, Harry. **She is lady-like, refined, intellectual, and fascinating, is she not?**”

“Yes, all of that; and, for that very reason, her influence over one so yielding and impulsive as yourself is more to be dreaded, if unfavorable. I'm quite in earnest, Mary. I could wish never to see you together again.”

“Pshaw! dear Harry, that's going too far. Don't be disagreeable; let us talk of something else. As old Uncle Jeff says, ‘How's trade?’” and she looked archly in his face.

Harry didn't smile.

HOW HUSBANDS MAY RULE

(continued)

“Well,” said the little wife, turning away, and patting her foot nervously, “I don’t see how I can break with her, Harry, for a whim of yours; besides, I’ve promised to go there this very evening.”

Harry made no reply, and in a few moments was on his way to his office.

Mary stood behind the curtain, and looked after him as he went down the street. There was an uncomfortable, stifling sensation in her throat, and something very like a tear glittering in her eye. Harry was vexed,— she was sure of that. . . .And so she wandered, restless and unhappy, into her little sleeping-room.

. . . . Turn where she would, some proof of his devotion met her eye. But Mrs. May! She was so smart and satirical! She would make so much sport of her, for being “ruled” so by Harry! No, no, it wouldn’t do for her to yield. . . .

HOW HUSBANDS MAY RULE

(continued)

Yes, she would go; she had quite made up her mind to that. Then she opened her jewel-case; a little note fell at her feet. She knew the contents very well. It was from Harry, —slipped slyly into her hand on her birthday, with that pretty bracelet. It couldn't do any harm to read it again. It was very lover-like for a year old husband; but she liked it! . . . Perhaps, after all, Harry was right about Mrs. May; and if he wasn't, one hair of his head was worth more to her than all the women in the world. He had never said one unkind word to her, —never! He had anticipated every wish. He had been so attentive and solicitous when she was ill. How could she grieve him? **Love conquered! The pretty robe was folded away, the jewels returned to their case, and, with a light heart, Mary sat down to await her husband's return. . . .**

“God bless you, Mary?” said the happy husband; “you've saved me from a keen sorrow!”

Dear reader, —won't you tell?—there are some husbands worth all the sacrifices a loving heart can make!

Based on “How Husbands May Rule,” what attributes characterize the cult of domesticity?

Who wrote these, and when were they written?

“Columns, books and articles by experts [told] women their role was to seek fulfillment as wives and mothers. . . . They were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights . . . A thousand expert voices applauded their femininity, their adjustment, their new maturity. All they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children.”

“We now see women in that sphere for which she was originally intended and which she is so exactly fitted to adorn and bless, as the wife, the mistress of the home, the solace, the aid, and the counselor of the ONE, for whose sake alone the world is any consequence to her.”

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—**Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique, 1963***

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—**George Washington Burnap, *The Sphere and Duties of Woman, 1854***



The Sphere of Women

How does this image illustrate the cult of domesticity?

Full page engraved illustration for an article from Godey's Lady's Book, Vol. 40 (March 1850): p. 209 (Philadelphia: Published by L. A. Godey). Caption: "Translated from the German of Goethe." Clifton Waller Barrett Collection, University of Virginia.

“The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” by Barbara Welter

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and her society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues:

- Piety = a religious habit of mind and spirit, enacted through service, suffering, upholding Christian morality in the home
- Purity = sexually virtuous, chaste, proper in all relations with “the opposite sex”
- Submissiveness = obedience, in ALL things, to one’s husband, because she is inferior in reason, strength, and intelligence
- Domesticity = the private sphere of the home is woman’s sacred space; housekeeping is her “morally uplifting task”; she must avoid frivolous or intellectually challenging distractions.

It should also be remembered, that when an American girl marries, she no longer entertains the desire to interest any but her husband. There is perhaps something in the security of matrimony that is not very propitious to female blandishments, and one ought to express no surprise that the wife who is content with the affections of her husband, should grow a little indifferent to the admiration of the rest of the world. One rarely sees married women foremost in the gay scenes. They attend, as observant and influencing members of society, but not as the principal actors.

Perhaps if the ladies had quite their own way, a little more relaxation would be permitted; but there is one remarkable peculiarity in their manners which precludes the possibility of any dangerous out-breaking of the kind: few ladies have any command of ready money entrusted to them. I have been a hundred times present when bills for a few dollars, perhaps for one, have been brought for payment to ladies living in perfectly easy circumstances, who have declared themselves without money, and referred the claimant to their husbands for payment. On every occasion where immediate disbursement is required it is the same; even in shopping for ready cash they say, “send a bill home with the things, and my husband will give you a draft.”

Letter from Tocqueville to his sister, describing the courtship and marriage habits of the Americans. (June 9, 1831)

We are living, dear sister, in the most singular country in the world. You have certainly heard it said that in England the married women lead a sedentary life, and that the young ladies enjoyed, on the contrary, a great liberty. Very well! Know that here they are as far [advanced] over England as England is over us. When a woman marries, it's as if she entered a convent, except however that it is not taken ill that she have children, and even many of them. Otherwise, it's the life of a nun; no more balls; hardly any more society; a husband as estimable as cold for all company; and that to the life eternal. I ventured the other day to ask one of these charming recluses just how, exactly, a wife could pass her time in America. She answered me, with great *sang-froid*: in admiring her husband. I'm very sorry: but that's the literal translation of the English. I tell you this so that, should you happen to be bored at home, you may know what you have to do.

On Marriage in America: Beaumont's letter to his family,
Gustave de Beaumont (May 16, 1831)

In America this freedom is given to a woman only to be snatched away suddenly. In our country, the young girl exchanges the swaddling bands of infancy for the bonds of matrimony; but these new bonds rest lightly upon her. In taking a husband, she gains the right to join the outside world; by engaging herself she becomes free. Then begins the life of parties, pleasures, conquests. In America, on the contrary, the gay life is the young girl's; she retires from worldly pleasures to live among the austere duties of the domestic hearth. A man pays homage to her not because she is a woman, but because she can become a wife. Her coquetry, after catching her a husband, is of no more use, and after she has given herself in marriage, she uses it no more.

In the United States a woman ceases to be free on the day when, in France, she becomes so.

Did the cult of domesticity oppress women or empower them?

CHAPTER IX: In Which It Appears That a Senator Is But a Man

Mrs. Bird was a timid, blushing little woman, of about four feet in height, and with mild blue eyes, and a peach-blow complexion, and the gentlest, sweetest voice in the world; —as for courage, a moderate-sized cock-turkey had been known to put her to rout at the very first gobble, and a stout house-dog, of moderate capacity, would bring her into subjection merely by a show of his teeth. Her husband and children were her entire world, and in these she ruled more by entreaty and persuasion than by command or argument. There was only one thing that was capable of arousing her, and that provocation came in on the side of her unusually gentle and sympathetic nature; —anything in the shape of cruelty would throw her into a passion, which was the more alarming and inexplicable in proportion to the general softness of her nature. . . .

On the present occasion, Mrs. Bird rose quickly, with very red cheeks, which quite improved her general appearance, and walked up to her husband, with quite a resolute air, and said, in a determined tone,

“Now, John, I want to know if you think such a law as that is right and Christian?”

“You won’t shoot me, now, Mary, if I say I do!”

“I never could have thought it of you, John; you didn’t vote for it?”

“Even so, my fair politician.”

CHAPTER IX: In Which It Appears That a Senator Is But a Man (continued)

“No, nonsense! I wouldn’t give a fip for all your politics, generally, but I think this is something downright cruel and unchristian. I hope, my dear, no such law has been passed.”

“There has been a law passed forbidding people to help off the slaves that come over from Kentucky, my dear; so much of that thing has been done by these reckless Abolitionists, that our brethren in Kentucky are very strongly excited, and it seems necessary, and no more than Christian and kind, that something should be done by our state to quiet the excitement.”

“And what is the law? It don’t forbid us to shelter those poor creatures a night, does it, and to give ’em something comfortable to eat, and a few old clothes, and send them quietly about their business?”

“Why, yes, my dear; that would be aiding and abetting, you know.”

CHAPTER IX: In Which It Appears That a Senator Is But a Man (continued)

“You ought to be ashamed, John! Poor, homeless, houseless creatures! It’s a shameful, wicked, abominable law, and I’ll break it, for one, the first time I get a chance; and I hope I *shall* have a chance, I do! Things have got to a pretty pass, if a woman can’t give a warm supper and a bed to poor, starving creatures, just because they are slaves, and have been abused and oppressed all their lives, poor things!”

“But, Mary, just listen to me. Your feelings are all quite right, dear, and interesting, and I love you for them; but, then, dear, we mustn’t suffer our feelings to run away with our judgment; you must consider it’s a matter of private feeling, -- there are great public interests involved, -- there is such a state of public agitation rising, that we must put aside our private feelings.”

“Now, John, I don’t know anything about politics, but I can read my Bible; and there I see that I must feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the desolate; and that Bible I mean to follow.”

CHAPTER IX: In Which It Appears That a Senator Is But a Man (continued)

“But in cases where your doing so would involve a great public evil — ”

“Obeying God never brings on public evils. I know it can't. It's always safest, all round, to *do as He* bids us.”

“Now, listen to me, Mary, and I can state to you a very clear argument, to show — ”

“O, nonsense, John! —you can talk all night, but you wouldn't do it. I put it to you, John, —would *you* now turn away a poor, shivering, hungry creature from your door, because he was a runaway? *Would* you, now?”

CHAPTER IX: In Which It Appears That a Senator Is But a Man (continued)

Now, if the truth must be told, our senator had the misfortune to be a man who had a particularly humane and accessible nature, and turning away anybody that was in trouble never had been his forte; and what was worse for him in this particular pinch of the argument was, that his wife knew it, and, of course was making an assault on rather an indefensible point. So he had recourse to the usual means of gaining time for such cases made and provided; he said “ahem,” and coughed several times, took out his pocket-handkerchief, and began to wipe his glasses. Mrs. Bird, seeing the defenceless condition of the enemy’s territory, had no more conscience than to push her advantage.

“I should like to see you doing that, John — I really should! Turning a woman out of doors in a snowstorm, for instance; or may be you’d take her up and put her in jail, wouldn’t you? You would make a great hand at that!”

The tendencies of democratic institutions, in reference to the rights and interests of the female sex, have been fully developed in the United States; and it is in this aspect, that the subject is one of peculiar interest to American women. In this Country, it is established, both by opinion and by practice, that woman has an equal interest in all social and civil concerns; and that no domestic, civil, or political, institution, is right, which sacrifices her interest to promote that of the other sex. But in order to secure her the more firmly in all these privileges, it is decided, that, in the domestic relation, she take a subordinate station, and that, in civil and political concerns, her interests be entrusted to the other sex, without her taking any part in voting, or in making and administering laws.

X. A PERILOUS PASSAGE IN THE SLAVE GIRL'S LIFE, pages 82-89

When my master said he was going to build a house for me, and that he could do it with little trouble and expense, I was in hopes something would happen to frustrate his scheme; but I soon heard that the house was actually begun. I vowed before my Maker that I would never enter it. . . . I was determined that the master, whom I so hated and loathed, who had blighted the prospects of my youth, and made my life a desert, should not, after my long struggle with him, succeed at last in trampling his victim under his feet. I would do any thing, every thing, for the sake of defeating him

And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life, which I would gladly forget if I could. The remembrance fills me with sorrow and shame. It pains me to tell you of it; but I have promised to tell you the truth, and I will do it honestly, let it cost me what it may. I will not try to screen myself behind the plea of compulsion from a master; for it was not so. . . . I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation.

X. A PERILOUS PASSAGE IN THE SLAVE GIRL'S LIFE, pages 82-89 (continued)

But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! . . . I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me. I felt as if I was forsaken by God and man; as if all my efforts must be frustrated; and I became reckless in my despair.

I have told you that Dr. Flint's persecutions and his wife's jealousy had given rise to some gossip in the neighborhood. Among others, it chanced that a white unmarried gentleman had obtained some knowledge of the circumstances in which I was placed. . . . He expressed a great deal of sympathy, and a wish to aid me. He constantly sought opportunities to see me, and wrote to me frequently. I was a poor slave girl, only fifteen years old. . . . He was an educated and eloquent gentleman; too eloquent, alas, for the poor slave girl who trusted in him. Of course I saw whither all this was tending. I knew the impassable gulf between us; but to be an object of interest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master, is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave, if her miserable situation has left her any pride or sentiment. It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment.

X. A PERILOUS PASSAGE IN THE SLAVE GIRL'S LIFE, pages 82-89 (continued)

When I found that my master had actually begun to build the lonely cottage, other feelings mixed with those I have described. Revenge, and calculations of interest, were added to flattered vanity and sincere gratitude for kindness. I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favored another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way. . . . I made a headlong plunge. Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hated tyrant; you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice. I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others.

There are few people who speak approbatively of a woman who has a smart business talent or capability. No matter how isolated or destitute her condition, the majority would consider it more “feminine” would she unobtrusively gather up her thimble, and, retiring into some out-of-the-way place, gradually scoop out her coffin with it, than to develop that smart turn for business which would lift her at once out of her troubles; and which, in a man so situated, would be applauded as exceedingly praiseworthy.

— Fanny Fern, *Ruth Hall: A Domestic Tale of the Present Time*, 1854.

Discussion Question

What, in this quotation from Fern’s *Ruth Hall*, might have led Nathaniel Hawthorne to write: “I have since been reading *Ruth Hall*; and I must say I enjoyed it a good deal. The woman writes as if the Devil was in her; and that is the only condition under which a woman ever writes anything worth reading”?

“What Soft Cherubic Creatures” by Emily Dickinson

What Soft – Cherubic Creatures –
These Gentlewomen are –
One would as soon assault a Plush –
Or violate a Star –
Such Dimity Convictions –
A Horror so refined
Of freckled Human Nature –
Of Deity – ashamed –
It’s such a common – Glory –
A Fisherman’s – Degree –
Redemption – Brittle Lady –
Be so – ashamed of Thee –

Final slide

Thank You