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RELATED ENTRIES

Boone, Daniel; Boyhood; Hunting; Individualism; Jackson, Andrew; Leatherstocking Tales; Politics; Property; Western Frontier

—Elizabeth Abele

CULT OF DOMESTICITY

The “cult of domesticity” was first explored as a historical phenomenon in antebellum U.S. society by Barbara Welter, who wrote in 1966 of a “cult of true womanhood,” though the phrase itself was coined by the historian Aileen Kraditor in 1968. Part of a broader nineteenth-century northern middle-class ideology of “separate spheres,” the cult of domesticity identified womanhood with the private or domestic sphere of the home and manhood with the public sphere of economic competition and politics. While the cult of domesticity primarily concerned a definition of femininity, defining the home as a space governed by women’s sentimental, moral and spiritual influence, this ideology also contributed to definitions of manliness and sought to control male

passions at a time when the market revolution, urbanization, westward migration, and partisan politics removed traditional communal restraints on male behavior. Through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the cult of domesticity provided a powerful conceptual rationale for organizing (and reorganizing) social relations.

The Cult of Domesticity and Middle-Class Manhood in the Nineteenth Century

Between the 1780s and the 1840s, the United States developed from a preindustrial society comprised of small communities to a more urban and industrialized society. This transformation created a middle class that occupied a distinct social and cultural stratum in U.S. society, and new models of masculinity helped to define this new class. To respond to the competitive pressures and opportunities of an expanding domestic market, middle-class men relocated their businesses from their households into separate offices away from the home. This functional separation of work and production from the home environment prompted middle-class men and women to redefine the domestic sphere as a counterpoint to a competitive, and often vicarious, marketplace, making the home a private refuge from the hustle and bustle of public life. This separation also prompted the construction of new definitions of manhood and womanhood suitable to the emerging social and economic order.

The ideology of domesticity defined men as naturally competitive and aggressive providers—traits appropriate to a public world of expanding commercial capitalism and to their responsibilities as breadwinners—while it defined women as naturally suited to home life through their inclination to compassion and piety. According to the cult of domesticity, males would be morally strengthened by women in the private sphere of the home, where they would be influenced by Christian piety, moral resolve, and such sentimental values as sincerity, candor, and faithfulness. While social change encouraged men to be more assertive and pursue their individual self-interest, Victorian Americans, concerned that such characteristics threatened social cohesion, envisioned the ideal man as a Christian gentleman who abstained from excess in all walks of life while fulfilling his obligations as a breadwinner and a citizen.

The cult of domesticity expressed middle-class Americans’ discomfort with the kinds of social relations fostered by market capitalism. The insistence on the separation of the private, or domestic, sphere from the public sphere was intended to prevent the intrusion of market forces into the home and the commodification of personal relations. Yet by assigning men

exclusive purview of the public realm and defining them as naturally inclined to competition and aggression, it legitimated an amoral and acquisitive male individualism. The cult of domesticity thus used diametrically opposed definitions of masculinity and femininity to create a coherent middle-class value system that embraced the apparently conflicting forces of competitive capitalism and moral behavior.

While middle-class men found in the cult of domesticity a basis for a marketplace model of manhood and their monopolization of economic and political power, many of them also used it to construct a model of middle-class manhood that emphasized domestic attachment and the pleasures of private life. Such men tended to resent, rather than celebrate, the separation between their public and private lives. For example, the southern lawyer and U.S. attorney general William Wirt and his wife Elizabeth were separated by his position for most of their marriage. Wirt enjoyed his public career, but lamented his separation from his family and from the joys and duties of domestic life.

Men like Wirt perceived domestic life and its affectionate, sentimental relations as central to male life and identity. Similarly, several male authors between 1820 and 1860 cherished men's capacity for domestic life. In novels such as Nathaniel Beverly Tucker's *George Balcombe* (1836) or James Fenimore Cooper's *Wyandotte* (1837), the domestic sphere figured as a source of happiness and true fulfillment for both women and men. In these and many other works of fiction, male characters actively desired marital bliss, domestic life, and the morally and spiritually elevating influence of a wife as indispensable to male wholeness.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, middle-class men became more ambivalent toward domesticity. On the one hand, they developed an ideal of "masculine domesticity"; that is, they sought to cultivate the domestic components of masculine identity and to masculinize a domestic sphere that had become increasingly mother-centered after the market revolution began removing male labor from the home. On the other hand, middle-class men, increasingly concerned that female domestic influence left them overcivilized, excessively genteel, or even effeminate, often rejected domesticity in favor of ideals of "passionate manhood" and a "strenuous life" that emphasized duty, obligation, military valor, physical vigor and exercise, struggle against obstacles, competition in sports and business, and an attempt to recover a primitive masculine self. Proponents believed that these ideals would enable men to defy the effeminizing effects of women's domesticity and restore men to their role as patriarchs of their homes.

Domesticity and Class in the Nineteenth Century

The cult of domesticity defined an emergent middle-class manhood by contrasting middle-class men not only with middle-class women, but also with working-class men. Like middle-class men, working-class men increasingly had to seek work outside their homes. However, because working-class men were often unable to earn sufficient income to allow them to be their families' sole breadwinners, their households remained sites of income-generating work as their wives and children labored to supplement working-class men's earnings, especially during times of unemployment. The notion of the home as a moral counterpoint to the amoral public sphere, as a feminine arena where masculinity was spiritually fortified, was therefore a signifier of middle-class status unavailable to many working-class men.

At the same time, however, many working-class men used the idea of domesticity as a gauge against which to measure their own manhood and to define their class-based agendas. Regarding the domestic sphere as integral to their manliness, they argued that the higher wages and shorter hours they sought would allow them to become breadwinners responsible for nonworking spouses and children, and thus achieve greater domestic involvement.

The Twentieth Century: Domesticity Challenged and Affirmed

Through the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, the cult of domesticity and the ideology of separate spheres provided an influential matrix for ordering social life, defining gender roles, and conceptualizing middle-class manhood. However, with the increasing presence of women in public life, politics, and the workplace during the twentieth century, these ideologies began to appear antiquated, losing their former cultural power in ordering U.S. gender relations. Yet many Americans continued to retain nostalgic attachment to notions of domesticity and its conceptualization of manhood, particularly in response to perceived threats to the American way of life.

For example, the Great Depression of the 1930s prompted calls to give men priority in hiring as a way to stabilize domestic life amid the crisis. Similarly, Cold War anxieties of the 1950s sparked a defense of traditional patriarchal domesticity as the foundation of American society—a defense evident in such television programs as *Father Knows Best* (1954–63) and *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–63). The social and cultural upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, including a resurgent feminist movement, rising divorce rates, and the growing incidence of dual-income households, led political conservatives and evangelical

Christians to present traditional domesticity and patriarchy as an antidote to cultural chaos—a position they continued to defend in the early twenty-first century.

These same upheavals led many other Americans, however, to once again question traditional notions of domesticity. Late-twentieth-century mass culture and television entertainment reflected this new criticism by displaying a decided ambivalence towards domesticity. For example, shows such as *The Simpsons* (premiered in 1989) and *Roseanne* (1988–97) tapped an ongoing interest in domesticity, while also exposing the unrealistic aspects of domesticity and the difficulties of achieving and maintaining it. In *The Simpsons*, housewife Marge Simpson's civilizing efforts fail to make her dysfunctional husband Homer conform to her ideal of the perfect husband and father. *Roseanne*—a show that located the majority of its plots in the family's living room—ended with the divorce of the main characters because domesticity, as nineteenth-century Americans had envisioned it, was unachievable for dual-income, lower-middle-class families in the late twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, the ideal of domesticity—often romanticized, yet frequently unattainable and regarded with increasing skepticism—continues to inform public discourse on gender and family life.

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RELATED ENTRIES

Advice Literature; Breadwinner Role; Business/Corporate America; Fatherhood; *Father Knows Best*; Labor Movement and Unions; *Leave It to Beaver*; Market Revolution; Masculine Domesticity; Middle-Class Manhood; Passionate Manhood; Patriarchy; Self-Control; Sentimentalism; Strenuous Life; Victorian Era; Working-Class Manhood

—Thomas Winter