

"Notes on The Cult of Domesticity and True Womanhood,"  
Professor Catherine Lavender, Prepared for Students in HST 386:  
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Charles Dana Gibson, *No Time for Politics*, 1910

Between 1820 and the Civil War, the growth of new industries, businesses, and professions helped to create in America a new middle class. (The Middle class consisted of families whose husbands worked as lawyers, office workers, factory managers, merchants, teachers, physicians and others.)

Although the new middle-class family had its roots in preindustrial society, it differed from the preindustrial family in three major ways:

- 1) A nineteenth-century middle-class family did not have to make what it needed in order to survive. Men could work in jobs that produced goods or services while their wives and children stayed at home.
- 2) When husbands went off to work, they helped create the view that men alone should support the family. This belief held that the world of work, the public sphere, was a rough world, where a man did what he had to in order to succeed, that it was full of temptations, violence, and trouble. A woman who ventured out into such a world could easily fall prey to it, for women were weak and delicate creatures. A woman's place was therefore in the private sphere, in the home, where she took charge of all that went on.
- 3) The middle-class family came to look at itself, and at the nuclear family in general, as the backbone of society. Kin and community remained important, but not nearly so much as they had once been. A new ideal of womanhood and a new ideology about the home arose out of the new attitudes about work and family. Called the "cult of domesticity," it is found in women's magazines, advice books, religious journals, newspapers, fiction--everywhere in popular culture. This new ideal provided a new view of women's duty and role while cataloging the cardinal virtues of true womanhood for a new age. (For an example of this, see Accessible Archives's *The Complete Godey's Lady's Book - 1830-1896*, available online at <http://www.accessible-archives.com/collections/godeys-ladys-book/>)

This ideal of womanhood had essentially four parts--four characteristics any good and proper young woman should cultivate: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness.

### ***Ideal Number One: Piety***

Nineteenth-century Americans believed that women had a particular propensity for religion. The modern young woman of the 1820s and 1830s was thought of as a new Eve working with God to bring the world out of sin through her suffering, through her pure, and passionless love.

Religion was thought to be a good thing in women, a salve for a potentially restless mind, an occupation which could be undertaken within woman's proper sphere--the home. The early women's seminaries and academies, which were under attack for leading women astray from their true purpose and task in life, promised that far from taking women away from religion, they would make of young women handmaidens of God, efficient auxiliaries in the great task of renovating the world. Irreligion in females was considered "the most revolting human characteristic." Indeed, it was said that "godless, no woman, mother tho she be."

### ***Ideal Number Two: Purity***

Female purity was also highly revered. Without sexual purity, a woman was no woman, but rather a lower form of being, a "fallen woman," unworthy of the love of her sex and unfit for their company.

To contemplate the loss of one's purity brought tears and hysteria to young women. This made it a little difficult, and certainly a bit confusing, to contemplate one's marriage, for in popular literature, the marriage night was advertised as the greatest night in a woman's life, the night when she bestowed upon her husband her greatest treasure, her virginity. From thence onward, she was dependent upon him, an empty vessel without legal or emotional existence of her own. A woman must guard her treasure with her life. Despite any male attempt to assault her, she must remain pure and chaste. She must not give in, must not give her treasure into the wrong hands. The

following is advice on how to protect oneself and one's treasure given by Mrs. Eliza Farrar, author of *The Young Woman's Friend*: "sit not with another in a place that is too narrow; read not out of the same book; let not your eagerness to see anything induce you to place your head close to another person's."

To ignore such advice was to court disaster. The consequences could be terrible--usually, in popular literature, a woman who allowed herself to be seduced by a man atoned for her sin by dying, most often in poverty, depravity, or intemperance. There were numerous stories about unwed mothers punished by God for their sin by losing their babies and going mad.

Female purity was also viewed as a weapon, to be used by good women to keep men in control of their sexual needs and desires, all for their own good. A woman's only power was seen as coming through her careful use of sexual virtue. Note the following quote from a popular ladies magazine: "the man bears rule over his wife's person and conduct. She bears rule over his inclinations: he governs by law; she by persuasion...The empire of women is the empire of softness, her commands are caresses, her menaces are tears."

American culture of the early nineteenth century underwent a purity fetish, such that it touched even the language of the day, popular decorating, and myths. This is when Americans began to talk about limbs for legs (even when referring to the legs of chairs) and white meat instead of breast meat (in fowl)--this is the language of repression. This is when women began to decorate the limbs of chairs, pianos, tables, to cover them with fabric so that one would not be reminded of legs. Proper women were admonished to separate male and female authors on bookcases, unless, of course, they were married to each other. This is also when myth of stork bringing babies emerges, and that babies came from cabbage patches.

### *Ideal Number Three: Submissiveness*

This was perhaps the most feminine of virtues. Men were supposed to be religious, although not generally. Men were supposed to be pure, although one could really not expect it. But men never supposed to be submissive. Men were to be movers, and doers--the actors in life. Women were to be passive bystanders, submitting to fate, to duty, to God, and to men.

Women were warned that this was the order of things. *The Young Ladies Book* summarized for the unknowledgeable the passive virtues necessary in women: "It is certain that in whatever situation of life a woman is placed from her cradle to her grave, a spirit of obedience and submission, pliability of temper, and humility of mind are required of her."

Just in case she might not get the point, female submissiveness and passivity were assured for the nineteenth century woman by the clothing she was required to wear. Tight corset lacing closed off her lungs and pinched her inner organs together. Large numbers of undergarments and the weight of over dresses limited her physical mobility.

A true woman knew her place, and knew what qualities were wanted in her opposite. Said George Burnap, in *The Sphere and Duties of Woman*: "She feels herself weak and timid. She needs a protector. She is in a measure dependent. She asks for wisdom, constancy, firmness, perseveredness, and she is willing to repay it all by the surrender of the full treasure of her affection. Women despise in men everything like themselves except a tender heart. It is enough that she is effeminate and weak; she does not want another like herself."

Such views were commonplace. A number of popular sayings reiterated: "A really sensible woman feels her dependence. She does what she can, but she is conscious of her inferiority and therefore

grateful for support." "A woman has a head almost too small for intellect but just big enough for love." "True feminine genius is ever timid, doubtful, and clingingly dependent; a perpetual childhood."

### *Ideal Number Four: Domesticity*

Woman's place was in the home. Woman's role was to be busy at those morally uplifting tasks aimed at maintaining and fulfilling her piety and purity.

Housework was deemed such an uplifting task. *Godey's Ladies Book* argued, "There is more to be learned about pouring out tea and coffee than most young ladies are willing to believe." Needlework and crafts were also approved activities which kept women in the home, busy about her tasks of wifely duties and childcare, keeping the home a cheerful, peaceful place which would attract men away from the evils of the outer world.

For the true woman, a woman's rights were as follows:

The right to love whom others scorn,  
The right to comfort and to mourn,  
The right to shed new joy on earth,  
The right to feel the soul's high worth,  
Such woman's rights a God will bless  
And crown their champions with success.

The Cult of Domesticity developed as family lost its function as economic unit. Many of links between family and community closed off as work left home. Emergence of market economy and the devaluation of women's work. Increasingly, then, home became a self-contained unit. Privacy was a crucial issue for nineteenth-century families, and can see this concern in the spatial development of suburbs in urban areas as families sought single family dwellings where they could be even more isolated from others. Women remained in the home, as a kind of cultural hostage.

Women were expected to uphold the values of stability, morality, and democracy by making the home a special place, a refuge from the world where her husband could escape from the highly competitive, unstable, immoral world of business and industry. It was widely expected that in order to succeed in the work world, men had to adopt certain values and behaviors: materialism, aggression, vulgarity, hardness, rationality. But men also needed to develop another side to their nature, a human side, an anticompetitive side. The home was to be the place where they could do this. This was where they could express humanistic values, aesthetic values, love, honor, loyalty and faithfulness. The home was no longer a unit valued for its function in the community (or its economic productiveness), but rather for its isolation from the community and its service to its members.

Because the world of work was defined as male, the world of the home was defined as female. Part of its value lay in its leisurely aspects. Women increasingly became a complement to leisure, a kind of useless but beautiful object, set off by her special setting. The nineteenth-century household was cluttered with beautiful, ornate objects--elaborate patterns in cloth covering walls, ornate furniture, pianos, paintings, and bric-a-brac. Colors were muted--dark and velvety--all to surround, darken, and deepen the quiet of the home, and to accentuate the softness, submissiveness, and leisure of the woman within it, the angel of the house.

### *Scientific Sexism and Separate Spheres Ideology*

The characteristics of true manhood and womanhood and the separate spheres of male and female activity were believed to have a biological basis. Female nurturance, intuitive morality, domesticity, passivity, and delicacy, and male rationality, aggressiveness, independence, and toughness were all due to their physical makeup.

It was assumed that women were different from men, both physically and mentally inferior. Women's physical inferiority was based on three observations:

- 1) The visual evidence that women were generally physically smaller than men.
- 2) The belief that women had less physical stamina than men because they seemed to faint so much more (not necessarily an innate difference but one based on the clothing worn by the two sexes and the amount of exercise they got).
- 3) The knowledge that women menstruated, and therefore were believed physically incapacitated every month. Menstruation was regarded as a periodic illness inflicted upon women. It was believed that menstruation could bring on temporary insanity in women. Clearly women were inferior to men who were not interrupted or incapacitated every month by illness.
- 4) Women were deemed more delicate and weak than men because the female nervous system was finer, more irritable, and more prone to overstimulation and fatigue than the male nervous system, because of the "unpredictable nature" of the female reproductive system.

Physicians saw women as both the product and the prisoner of her reproductive system. The female uterus and ovaries provided the basis for her social role and her behavioral characteristics. One doctor argued that, "It was as if the Almighty, in creating the female sex, had taken the uterus and built up a woman around it." According to these doctors, the female reproductive system was also responsible for all of the many ailments which attacked women. The current model of disease followed by physicians was called "reflex irritation," and assumed that any imbalance, any infection, any disorder or fatigue would cause a reaction elsewhere in the body. If one, therefore, had a

headache or stomachache, or became irritable or faint, it was assumed that the problem was with the reproductive system. Women were subject to only one disease, then. The male reproductive system had no parallel degree of control over the male body. Men had headaches; women had "female complaints."

Women were deemed intellectually inferior to men as well as physically inferior. Again, this was based on two kinds of observations.

- 1) The "observed" phenomenon that "Women had smaller brains than men." Natural scientists measured cranial capacity, and brain weight and correlated these with intelligence. At first scientists developed ratios based on size of brain to body weight. But they discovered that female brain size to female body weight yielded a higher ratio than male brain size to male body weight. So they changed the correlation, and related brain weight to body height. This time they found that the male brain produced .73 ounces of weight for each inch of height, while the female brain produced only .70 ounces of weight for each inch of height.

There are two obvious problems with these assumptions: in humans, brain size does not appear to correlate with either body weight or height. Over time, the human brain has become smaller although people are both taller and weigh more than in early times. And secondly, there is no evidence that size, either relative or absolute correlates with intelligence. (By the way, the same type of study was used in the nineteenth century to show racial superiority and inferiority. One world's foremost authorities, Carl Vogt, professor of natural history at University of Geneva said: "The grown up Negro partakes, as regards his intellectual faculties, of the nature of the child, the female, and the senile white.")

- 2) It was also said that the female brain was of an inferior and more primitive type than the male brain. Much of this kind of interpretation came out of a pseudo science called phrenology. Phrenology was the art of reading the bumps and curves and shape of the skull. It was thought that the skull provided evidence of personality and character, because different parts of the skull housed different characteristics. It was clear to phrenologists who studied cranium that "woman is a constantly growing child, and in the brain, as in so many other parts of her body, she conforms to her childish type."

In addition to beliefs about physical and mental inferiority, were certain "scientific" views of human sexuality which governed nineteenth century men and women. These come down to essentially three ideas:

- 1) The human body has only a limited amount of energy. It is a closed system. The expenditure of energy must, therefore, be closely regulated, because one activity would drain energy from another.
- 2) The sexual instinct is the most primitive instinct. Phrenologists located it at the base of the brain.
- 3) Sexual feelings were strong in men, but absent in women (certainly in ladies). Actually was conflicted opinion about female sexuality -- passion in women was feared, because the demands it would make on men were insatiable and like a vampire, it was feared she would drain him of his life force. Men were seen in continual struggle with their passions. In the interests of their own health, they must control them -- but they were not expected always to succeed.

Given attitudes about sexuality, puberty was considered critical period for both men and women, and therefore the subject of much

advice. This was the time that men became strong and vigorous and women became timid and weak.

The period was critical for women and the future of the human race, because if women did not develop some equilibrium in their body, they would not only damage themselves, causing untold pain, cancer, disease, a difficult menopause, and early death, but they would also damage their children. For the nineteenth century believed that the traits of a child were inherited from his or her parents, but the laws of heredity differed from those we now recognize. They believed that men passed on to their children their outer frame, their musculature, and their intellect. Women passed on the condition of their internal organs, and their emotional stability or instability.

It was assumed that women had a lesser amount of energy, or "life force" than men. Bodily fluids like blood were one measure of "life forces." Because the female reproductive system was more complex than the male, it was considered important for women to channel all their energies into reproduction. Therefore, women were discouraged from intellectual activity because blood was needed for the development of the reproductive organs. This was particularly important at puberty, when menstruation began and physical development hastened. Women who diverted their energy would become weak, nervous, sterile, or capable only of bearing sickly and neurotic children. It was estimated that education took away about 20% of a woman's vital energy. Pregnant women too must not strain their brains, because intellectual activity would divert blood from the fetus, and result in the physical degeneration of the child, or their insanity.

Doctors advised women, from puberty to menopause, to direct their attention toward healthy reproduction. Women must avoid strong emotions, like anger, because they might damage their organs. Motherhood was a woman's normal function. Those who thwarted nature's plan must expect to suffer for their action. Spinsters and

celibates were thus fated to experience a greater incidence of physical and emotional disease, a shorter life span, and a reproductive system under constant pressure and therefore prone to cancer and degenerative ills. A woman's reproductive organs must be bathed occasionally with a man's vital force if she was to remain healthy.

Puberty was just as critical a time for men. This was the era of the self-made man, and men must concentrate their energies -- their life force -- on getting ahead in the world. Men must, in particular, reserve their sexual energies, because semen was believed to be the most potent of life forces. It was estimated that one ounce of semen carried as much energy as four ounces of blood. There was some concern about too much continence, that is, too little sexual expression in men, but for the most part, the concern was for excessive sexual activity.

Particularly at puberty, masturbation or frequent intercourse would result in premature decay, and the exposure of the male to disease and early death. Women's indifference to sex was upheld as a guard on men, helping them to protect themselves, and prevent over-expenditure of their life force.

One reason why Freud was so quickly accepted in America was that the idea of the sublimation of sexual energies in work or play was deeply ingrained in American culture. Dr. Frederick Hollic wrote: "I am fully persuaded that there is no case of precocious or excessive sexual propensity, unless caused by disease, that cannot be easily subdued by muscular exercise. No matter how vigorously the seminal glands may act, in a state of leisure, they must become less active if the body be exhausted by active exertion, and to this rule there is scarcely any limit."

The nineteenth century developed a whole vocabulary which demonstrates how closely sexual and economic metaphors overlapped in their minds. Mining, railroad building, canal digging, all held sexual overtones of male mastery over female nature.

Economic development was valued as an outlet for sexual needs. Euphemisms for sexual terms took on economic conceptions, as evidenced in the following pairings:

"ejaculation" = "expenditure"

"semen" = "thrift"

"intercourse" = "connubial commerce"

"virginity" = "treasure"

"child birth" = "labor"

A man's work duplicated women's reproductive power. These were the central factors in male/female identity and social role. The separate spheres of men and women were believed to be determined by men's and women's different physical and mental makeup.

For more information about the Cult of Domesticity, see The Smithsonian Libraries's *The Making of a Homemaker* (<http://www.sil.si.edu/ondisplay/making-homemaker/intro.htm>)

For information about the "New Woman," the twentieth-century identity that challenged "True Womanhood," see: Catherine J. Lavender, "Notes on the New Woman," Prepared for Students in HST 386: Women in the City, Department of History, The College of Staten Island/CUNY (1998), <https://csivc.csi.cuny.edu/history/files/lavender/386/newwoman.pdf>

## **ABOUT THESE NOTES:**

For further information about True Womanhood and the Cult of Domesticity, see Barbara Welter's classic essay, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860," *American Quarterly* 18/2 (1966): 151–174 (available online at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~DRBR2/welter.pdf>). Welter expands on this definition in her book *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1977).

The notes above are for the most part summary of Welter's work and of the lectures of Dr. Lee Chambers, Professor of American Women's History at the University of Colorado at Boulder and the author of *Liberty A Better Husband: Single Women in America, The Generations of 1780-1840* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

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