

Lesson 22

The Cult of Domesticity

Objective

- To understand how women responded to their changing roles in the early nineteenth century

Notes to the Teacher

Seventeenth and eighteenth-century families were primarily economic units in which men and women developed partnerships centered in the home. In the early nineteenth century, industrialization gave rise to a new urban middle class and took men involved in commerce and industry away from the home for their work. This separation of the home and family from the workplace led to a redefinition of the home as primarily the woman's sphere. Traditional woman's work, such as cooking, cleaning, and raising children, was now separated from the outside world of work and money. Contemporary authors, writing of man's sphere and woman's sphere, redefined the ideal woman in a way that devalued woman's work and created a prescriptive woman's role. Victorian, middle-class women now sought fulfillment through self-sacrifice. Today, historians call this role of women the "cult of domesticity."

During the 1830s, Angelina and Sarah Grimké began to challenge this narrow definition through their participation in the antislavery movement. Because they traveled, spoke in public, and lectured to crowds of both men and women, they were accused of leaving their appointed sphere, defying the laws of God, and endangering the family. Most women did not agree with the Grimké sisters. Catharine Beecher, for instance, argued women should influence society but only through their domestic sphere. Eventually the "woman question" led to a split in the antislavery movement and the beginning of the nineteenth-century women's rights movement.

In this lesson, students distinguish traditional male and female qualities. They show

how "feminine" qualities helped women to fulfill their responsibilities as defined by the "cult of domesticity." Statements from early debates concerning the proper role of women help students understand why the cult of domesticity continues to define women's role and makes equality an unrealized goal even today.

Procedure

1. Ask students to define division of labor. Discuss the traditional division of labor in the American family. Recite the bit of doggerel:

A man works from sun to sun,
But a woman's work is never done.

Discuss its meaning, and indicate that dissatisfaction with the division of labor by gender is a long-standing point of dispute. Use the Notes to the Teacher to provide a frame of reference for the lesson.

2. Distribute **Handout 22**, and have each student categorize by gender the qualities in Part A, Number 1. Review their answers to this question before discussing the rest of Part A.

Suggested responses: Part A: Number 1
Feminine qualities/characteristics include delicate, self-sacrifice, devotion, housework, private, sentiment, passive, innocent, moral center, modest, dependent, emotional, spiritual, weak, submissive, inferior
Male qualities/characteristics include tough, personal success, ambition, "real" work, public, logic, active, worldly, provider, assertive, independent, reasonable, material, strong, dominant, superior

3. Continue Part A through class discussion.

Suggested responses: Part A, Numbers 2–4

(2–3) *Answers will vary.*

(4) *Men saw home as a retreat from the harshness and competitiveness of the public sphere.*

3. Read the quotations in Part B aloud, and discuss the answers as a group activity.

Suggested responses: Part B

- (1) *Women should accept their traditional role but should become the moral center of the nation as well.*
- (2) *All people should share the same human rights.*
- (3) *Catharine Beecher accepted the inferior status of women and their “separate sphere.”*

- (4) *Angelina Grimké would be more of a feminist if she would use the vote and officeholding well to improve the home and the world for family. She would not accept inequality for women.*
- (5) *Answers will vary.*
- (6) *Answers will vary.*

The Cult of Domesticity

Part A.

1. Listed below are qualities of traditional nineteenth-century masculine and feminine roles. Study the list of matched terms and place each in the appropriate sphere: delicate/tough; personal success/self-sacrifice; ambition/devotion; housework/"real" work; private/public; logic/sentiment; active/passive; innocent/worldly; moral center/provider; assertive/modest; dependent/independent; emotional/reasonable; material/spiritual; strong/weak; submissive/dominant; inferior/superior.

MALE

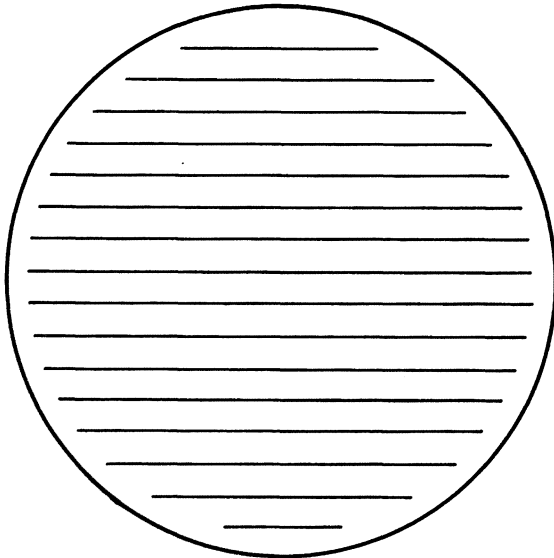


Figure 22.1

FEMALE

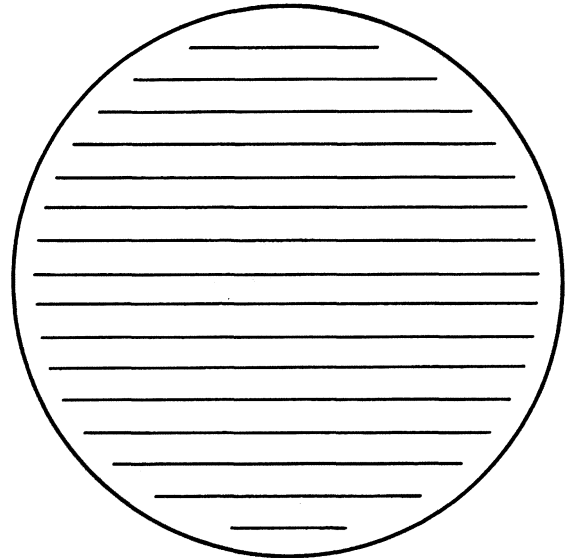


Figure 22.2

Now, answer the following questions based on your completed drawing.

2. In their sphere, women were responsible for the physical, emotional, educational, moral, and spiritual development of the family. How did the qualities help them to fulfill their responsibilities?

3. In their sphere, men were responsible for the economic well-being, social standing, political voice, and ultimate authority of the family? How did the qualities from the list help men fulfill their responsibilities?

4. With the separation of the home and workplace, what purpose did the home now have for the man in the family?

Part B. Read the following excerpts from letters, and answer the questions at the end.

It is the grand feature of the Divine economy, that there should be different stations of superiority and subordination, and it is impossible to annihilate this beneficent and immutable law. . . .

In this arrangement of the duties of life, Heaven has appointed to one sex the superior, and to the other the subordinate station, and this without any reference to the character or conduct of either. It is therefore as much for the dignity as it is for the interest of females, in all respects to conform to the duties of this relation. . . .

But while woman holds a subordinate relation in society to the other sex, it is not because it was designed that her duties or her influence should be any the less important, or all-pervading. But it was designed that the mode of gaining influence and of exercising power should be altogether different and peculiar. . . .

Woman is to win every thing by peace and love; by making herself so much respected, esteemed and loved, that to yield to her opinions and to gratify her wishes, will be the free-will offering of the heart. But this is to be all accomplished in the domestic and social circle. There let every woman become so cultivated and refined in intellect, that her taste and judgment will be respected; so benevolent in feeling and action; that her motives will be revered;—so unassuming and unambitious, that collision and competition will be banished;—so “gentle and easy to be entreated,” as that every heart will repose in her presence; then, the fathers, the husbands, and the sons, will find an influence thrown around them, to which they will yield not only willingly but proudly.¹

¹Catharine Beecher, *An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism with Reference to the Duty of American Females* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Henry Perkins, 1837), 98–101.

