The Cult of Domesticity

The Awakening
Understanding

- Nineteenth century, middle-class American women saw their behavior regulated by a social system known today as the cult of domesticity, which was designed to limit their sphere of influence to home and family. Yet within this space, they developed networks and modes of expression that allowed them to speak out on the major moral questions facing the nation.
The period of 1820 to 1860 saw the rise in America of an ideology of feminine behavior and an ideal of womanliness that has come to be known as the “Cult of True Womanhood” or “Cult of Domesticity.”

The features of this code, which provided social regulations for middle class families with newly acquired wealth and leisure, were defined by historian Barbara Welter in an influential 1966 article, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860.”
“True Womanhood”

- According to Welter, “true womanhood” held that women were designed exclusively for the roles of wife and mother and were expected to cultivate
  - Piety
  - Purity
  - Submissiveness
  - Domesticity
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.
Ideal Number Two: Purity

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.
Ideal Number Three: Submissiveness

- 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.

- 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 under garments and the weight of over dresses limited her physical mobility.
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. 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.
Sacred Domestic Duties

Arguments of biological inferiority led to pronouncements that women were incapable of effectively participating in the realms of politics, commerce, or public service.

- In return for a husband’s provision of security and protection, which by physical nature she required, the true woman would take on the obligations of housekeeping, raising good children, and making her family’s home a haven of health, happiness, and virtue.

- All society would benefit from her performance of these sacred domestic duties.
The Power Structure

- The Cult of Domesticity was designed for the wives and daughters of the men who made up America’s white, middle and upper class power structure.

- Men in this position, with stable incomes, came to rank one another according to the quality of their homes and family life, noticeable mostly in urban areas where proper, well-schooled wives became essential status symbols.
Domesticated Reform

The four women whose works are represented in the following lessons benefitted, in some ways ironically, from the domestic ideology that put them into a separate sphere from men.

- Communities of women, exalted in the home, used the superiority granted them in kitchen and drawing room to call for moral courage from men in the public realm.

- As opportunities for expression increased, even within their limited space, women developed a language, a kind of domesticated vocabulary of reform, through which they could reach and support one another.
Passages

“Uncle Tom’s Cabin” - Harriet Beecher Stowe
“Treatise on Domestic Economy” - Catherine Beecher
“How Husbands May Rule” – Fanny Fern
“Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl” – Harriet Jacobs
In each of the passage presented, at least two of the four principles of the cult of domesticity (piety, purity, submissiveness, domesticity) are illustrated, either positively or negatively, and these illustrations can be compared and contrasted.

While the four passages have other features in common, they also voice distinctive, even opposing views. One theme to note is the emphasis on the kinds of trade-off that take place within this cult, meaning that women might very well willingly choose to accept the “rule” of wise husbands and political leaders in return for security, material comfort, and protection.
“Girl”

Written by Jamaica Kincaid
“Girl”

- Written by Jamaica Kincaid
- ... born in Antigua in 1949
- Poem is a “to-do” list and a “how-to” list
- Antiguan folksongs, or benna, symbolizes sexuality
- Historically, native Antiguans sang benna to secretly spread scandalous rumors and gossip
- Singing benna in Sunday school represents not only disobedience but also sinful, forbidden knowledge that shouldn’t be discussed openly in public
Did you know?

Kate Chopin began writing to support herself and her six children when she was widowed at the age of 32. The social conservatism of the 19th century coupled with tabooed themes not yet embraced during the 20th century left the novel's sexually aware and shocking protagonist, Edna Pontillier, a disgraced and unattractive character. Chopin, her characters, and stories finally emerged from ostracization during the resurgence of women's rights in the early 1970s.

Jamaica Kincaid's status as an exile informs much of her writing, thus allowing her to achieve a necessary distance from both her past and her present as she examines the suffocating smallness and small-mindedness of her native land, Antigua. She compares it to the ignorance of North America, where she was sent at the age of 17. Kincaid's narrators also seem alienated from those around them and seek control over and freedom from relationships, a possible reflection of the central and most difficult and painful relationship in Kincaid's life, that with her mother.
In the world of Edna Pontellier one can either be defined by men or live a life separate from the rest of society.

“Women [can] either become wives and mothers . . . or exiles.”
Adele Ratignolle

is the epitome of the male-defined wife and mother

- “[The mother-women] were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (10)

- “She was keeping up her music on account of the children, she said; because she and her husband both considered it a means of brightening the home and making it attractive” (27).