

Cult Of True Womanhood also known as the Cult of Domesticity, is a term identifying a nineteenth-century ideology that women's nature suited them especially for tasks associated with the home. It identified four characteristics that were supposedly central to women's identity: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. The cult was first articulated in discussions of women's nature and their proper roles and became prominent in most industrializing societies around 1820; it reached its persuasive height by the 1890s in these areas, while in other European societies it did not begin to gain influence until the turn of the century. Vestiges remain with us today.

The cult dictated that True Women were the moral guardians of the family. They were particularly appropriate for that role because they were spiritually pure-and therefore closer to God. They remained pure because they stayed away from the degrading environment of the outside world, which ruined innocence: moral purity could not withstand the brutality of a world dominated by the unrestrained competition of the free enterprise system. This implied that, since men were constantly participating in the world, they were not as pure as, and therefore were spiritually inferior to, women. It was absolutely necessary for women to cling to the protection of the home. If they left that haven, they lost their innocence, their moral superiority, and ultimately their True Womanhood. Women thus gained their own sphere, which was entirely separate from men's.

A True Woman's role in life was to perform the domestic chores of the household-or oversee their performance by others (usually women) hired for that purpose. She prepared nutritious meals, nurtured her children both physically and spiritually, comforted her husband and soothed away the wounds of his encounters with the outside world, and stood as an invincible sentinel at the portals of the home to keep worldly pollution from entering and despoiling the family. The idea of True Womanhood was not new, but the self-conscious idea that women should conform to a particular image did not begin to be articulated until the early nineteenth century, when several historical developments prompted its appearance. Enlightenment philosophies made women the conduits through which cultural values (e.g., freedom and social responsibility) passed to future generations. American revolutionary rhetoric formulated that belief more concretely. The idealization of motherhood known as Moral Motherhood or Republican Motherhood emphasized women's natural piety as a basis for the job of instilling republican virtues and attempted to entice women back to the home after their entry into political life during the American Revolution. (See [REPUBLICAN MOTHERHOOD](#).)

The rapid growth of industrialization in the nineteenth century also contributed to the notion that women's special place was in the home. Industrialization moved men outside the home in pursuit of a livelihood. Although in the past women had done a variety of work from farming and husbandry to running inns and publishing newspapers, their traditional work-nurturing and its related duties-took place within, or very close, to the home. Since that job was still essential, and women had "always" done it, they were inevitably the ones who should remain in the home to continue it.

Medical science's definition of women's nature reinforced the idea of their confinement. Doctors believed that women were more fragile than men and that their frailty had to be protected because they were, in effect, the wombs of the nation. Women, therefore, should remain in the

home, away from the stress of the world. Social Darwinism's belief that only the fittest could survive reinforced this idea: since women were, by medical definition, not as fit as men, they needed a protected environment. Men, who were by necessity exposed to the outside world and wise in its ways, became women's logical protectors, while women, almost by default, became the keepers of the traditional values embodied by the home. Women's sphere became synonymous with the preindustrial religious and moral values the outside world seemed to have abandoned.

The cult offers a fine illustration of the way in which a phenomenon can interact dialectically with its environment to re-create its environment, reinforce itself, and at the same time redefine itself. True Womanhood encompassed all women. No female was too young or too old to receive instructions from the popular literature that glorified the True Woman. The courts and the churches reinforced women's seclusion in the home through legal decisions and sermons that emphasized women's frailty by dwelling on women's moral purity. But women then claimed this moral superiority as a legitimate platform for reform, which ironically took them outside the home by giving them a public voice in matters of civic virtue and public vice. This stance worked to make the cult both more aggressively oppressive and, simultaneously, less able to confine women in the home. Women's purity argued for strict seclusion from the corruptive elements of the outside world, but that very corruption obligated women to intervene in the male-run world for the good of their men, the community, the nation, and humankind. Thus, the more women accepted the tenets of the cult, the more they were forced to step outside them. Few women lived up to the dictates of the cult of True Womanhood, even when, at the end of the nineteenth century, it was most binding. Only the newly forming middle class could afford to keep its women at home, but the duties of a True Woman were so many and so idealized that even the most dedicated wife/mother could not fulfill them. Most women had no opportunity to try. Slave women, poor native-born and immigrant women, and working-class women worked outside the home throughout the nineteenth century. Though often their jobs were extensions of domestic tasks, they were performed in factories or in other people's houses, not in the security of their own homes.

The significance of the cult was not that it really described women's lives—recent research indicates that the cult was, in fact, a myth. Its importance is threefold. It limited women's aspirations for themselves; it created a model for life that generated extreme anxiety and stress because it was virtually impossible to live up to; and at the same time, ironically, it contained elements of its own destruction.

Despite the fact that the True Woman was a myth, she was very real in the minds of nineteenth-century people, as is evidenced by the women's magazines and didactic literature of the time. Historians had noted that nineteenth-century women's lives were constricted, but the existence of a cult of True Womanhood was pointed out only in 1966 by Barbara Welter (151-174). Since Welter's trenchant analysis the existence of a cult of True Womanhood has been fully accepted. Recent works, such as by Norton, and Kerber, have described the origins of the cult during the American Revolution and the early nineteenth century. Other works such as by Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood* and "Passionlessness" (162-181) and Dublin have attempted to understand how the cult actually affected women.

Other works have explored the cult in its European context. Examples are by Hellerstein, Hume, and Offen; Tilley and Scott; Hall; McMillan; and Smith.

Future work is needed to understand how the cult affected groups that could not achieve the cult's image and, perhaps more important, how the cult maintained its powerful hold on the mind when its image of women's lives was so clearly inaccurate.

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Related Links

[Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood."](#)

[The Cult of Domesticity and True Womanhood.](#)

References

Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood* (New Haven, Conn., 1977); Nancy F. Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850," in Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *A Heritage of Her Own* (New York, 1979); Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work* (New York, 1979); Catherine Hall, "The Early Formation of Victorian Domestic Ideology," in Sandra Berman (ed.), *Fit Work for Women* (New York, 1979); Erna O. Hellerstein, Leslie P. Hume, and Karen M. Offen (eds.), *Victorian Women* (Stanford, Calif., 1981); Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1980); James McMillan, *Housewife or Harlot* (New York, 1981); Mary Beth Norton; *Liberty's Daughters* (Boston, 1980); Bonnie G. Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class* (Princeton, 1981); Louise Tilley and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work and the Family* (New York, 1978); Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 16 (1996).

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