



Women, Temperance, and Domesticity

Advisors: Robert H. Abzug, Director, Schusterman Center for Jewish Studies; Audre and Bernard Rapoport Regents Chair of Jewish Studies, University of Texas. Lucinda MacKethan, Professor Emerita, Department of English, North Carolina State University, National Humanities Center Fellow.

© 2012 National Humanities Center

Framing Question

How did women's role in the campaign against alcohol consumption in 19th-century America reflect the strengths and limitations of the cult of domesticity?

Understanding

During much of the nineteenth century, middle-class American women saw their behavior regulated by a social system known today as the cult of domesticity, which limited their sphere of influence to home and family. Within that space they developed networks and modes of expression that allowed them to speak out on major moral questions facing the nation. However, those indirect and subtle avenues of influence proved ineffectual against the issue of alcohol abuse, which struck at the heart of family. Finding themselves virtually powerless to combat alcoholism and the spread of the saloon from within the domestic sphere, some women took the radical step of engaging in public protest and in so doing mobilized the moral authority of domesticity. Ironically, in the end, the very family life they sought to defend frustrated their efforts at reform.

Texts

- "[A Nation of Drunkards](#)," video from *Prohibition*, a film by Ken Burns & Lynn Novick, 2011 (6:04 time)
- T. S. Arthur, [Ten Nights in a Bar-Room](#), novel, 1854, excerpts
- "[Eliza Jane Thompson](#)," video from *Prohibition*, a film by Ken Burns & Lynn Novick, 2011 (7:12 time)

Background

The period from 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 socially determined 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." 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, and domesticity in all their relations. Also exclusive was their "sphere," or domain of influence, which was confined completely to the home. Thus the cult of domesticity "privatized" women's options for work, for education, for voicing opinions, or for supporting reform. Arguments of biological inferiority led to pronouncements



"Ten Nights in a Bar-Room," 1854, frontispiece

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.

Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of texts are we dealing with?
2. When were they written?
3. Who wrote them?
4. For what audience were they intended?
5. For what purpose were they written?

While the cult of domesticity subordinated women, it enhanced their authority in certain areas. As Catherine Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe's sister, wrote in her *Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1842), "In matters pertaining to the education of their children... in all benevolent enterprises, and in all questions relating to morals or manners, they have a superior influence." The way middle-class women responded to the problem of alcohol abuse in antebellum America illustrates how the cult of domesticity both limited and empowered them.

In the early nineteenth century, alcohol abuse became a serious problem among American men. Interpreted largely as a moral failing, it inflicted grave damage on family life. Thus, within the strictures of the cult of domesticity, it was an issue on which women could legitimately speak out, for in doing so they were defending the family. Furthermore, responsibility for combating alcoholism fell largely to them in their capacity as mothers: raise temperate boys, they were told, and they will become temperate men.

Yet, as women discovered, they could not deal with this problem from within the confines of the home. Acting upon this realization, some middle-class women stepped outside the sphere of domesticity to try to end the sale of alcohol. As radical a move as this was, it was still rooted in the cult of domesticity: the techniques they employed in their protest — prayer, hymn singing, and moral suasion tempered with modesty — mobilized in public the virtues they were expected to exemplify in private. The effort failed largely because the very family life they were defending called them back to the home. Nonetheless, while their foray into the public sphere demonstrated the limits of their influence, it also caused some middle-class women to question the subordination imposed by the cult of domesticity.

Text Analysis

Text 1: "[A Nation of Drunkards](#)," from the film *Prohibition* (PBS)



Men presumably sleeping off a drunken spree, New York City, 1892

1. Why had alcohol consumption become a growing problem in America in the early 1800s?

2. How was alcohol consumption “a sign of masculinity that took away masculinity”?

3. What was “the degradation of Saturday night”?

4. Why were American children and women especially vulnerable in the early 1800s?

5. How did the issue of alcohol abuse give women a way to talk about other issues?

Text 2: *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*, novel, 1854, excerpts

The case of young Hammond had, from the first, awakened concern; and now a new element was added in the unlooked-for appearance of his mother on the stage, in a state that seemed one of partial derangement. The gentleman at whose office I met Mr. Harrison on the day before — the reader will remember Mr. H. as having come to the “Sickle and Sheath” in search of his son — was thoroughly conversant with the affairs of the village, and I called upon him early in the day in order to make some inquiries about Mrs. Hammond. My first question, as to whether he knew the lady, was answered by the remark:

“Oh, yes. She is one of my earliest friends.”

The allusion to her did not seem to awaken agreeable states of mind [did not bring pleasure]. A slight shade obscured his face, and I noticed that he sighed involuntarily.

“Is Willy her only child?”

“Her only living child. She had four; another son, and two daughters; but she lost all but Willy when they were quite young. And,” he added, after a pause, “it would have been better for her, and for Willy, too, if he had gone to a better land with them.”

“His course of life must be to her a terrible affliction,” said I.

“It is destroying her reason,” he replied, with emphasis. “He was her idol. No mother ever loved a son with more self-devotion than Mrs. Hammond loved her beautiful, fine-spirited, intelligent, affectionate boy. To say that she was proud of him is but a tame expression. Intense love — almost idolatry — was the strong passion of her heart. How tender, how watchful was her love! Except when at school, he was scarcely ever separated from her. In order to keep him by her side, she gave up her thoughts to the suggestion and maturing of plans for keeping his mind active and interested in her society [she devoted her thoughts to coming up with ways to

keep him close to her] —and her success was perfect. Up to the age of sixteen or seventeen, I do not think he had a desire for other companionship than that of his mother. But this, you know, could not last. The boy's maturing thought must go beyond the home and social circle. The great world, that he was soon to enter, was before him; and through loopholes that opened here and there he obtained partial glimpses of what was beyond. To step forth into this world, where he was soon to be a busy actor and worker, and to step forth alone, next came in the natural order of progress. How his mother trembled with anxiety, as she saw him leave her side! Of the dangers that would surround his path, she knew too well; and these were magnified by her fears — at least so I often said to her. Alas! how far the sad reality has outrun her most fearful anticipations.

“When Willy was eighteen — he was then reading law [studying to be a lawyer] — I think I never saw a young man of fairer promise. As I have often heard it remarked of him, he did not appear to have a single fault. But he had a dangerous gift — rare conversational powers, united with great urbanity of manner. Every one who made his acquaintance became charmed with his society [friendliness]; and he soon found himself surrounded by a circle of young men, some of whom were not the best companions he might have chosen. Still, his own pure instincts and honorable principles were his safeguard; and I never have believed that any social allurements would have drawn him away from the right path, if this accursed tavern had not been opened by Slade [the owner of the Sickle and Sheaf].”

“There was a tavern here before the Sickle and Sheaf was opened?” said I.

“Oh, yes. But it was badly kept, and the bar-room visitors were of the lowest class. No respectable young man in Cedarville would have been seen there. It offered no temptations to one moving in Willy's circle. But the opening of the Sickle and Sheaf formed a new era. Judge Hammond — himself not the purest man in the world, I'm afraid — gave his countenance to the establishment, and talked of Simon Slade as an enterprising man who ought to be encouraged. Judge Lyman and other men of position in Cedarville followed his bad example; and the bar-room of the Sickle and Sheaf was at once voted respectable. At all times of the day and evening you could see the flower of our young men going in and out, sitting in front of the bar-room, or talking hand-and-glove with the landlord, who, from a worthy miller [Simon Slade, the owner of the tavern, had once owned a gristmill], regarded as well enough in his place, was suddenly elevated into a man of importance, whom the best in the village were delighted to honor.

“In the beginning, Willy went with the tide, and, in an incredibly short period, was acquiring a fondness for drink that startled and alarmed his friends. In going in through Slade's open door, he entered the downward way, and has been moving onward with fleet footsteps ever since. The fiery poison inflamed his mind, at the same time that it dimmed his noble perceptions. Fondness for mere pleasure followed, and this led him into various sensual indulgences [physical pleasures], and exciting modes of passing the time. Every one liked him — he was so free, so companionable, and so generous — and almost every one encouraged, rather than repressed, his dangerous proclivities. Even his father, for a time, treated the matter lightly, as only the first flush of young life. ‘I commenced sowing my wild oats at quite as early an age,’ I have heard him say. ‘He'll cool off, and do well enough. Never fear.’ But his mother was in a state of painful alarm from the beginning. Her truer instincts, made doubly acute by her yearning love, perceived the imminent danger, and in all possible ways did she seek to lure him from the path in which he was moving at so rapid a pace. Willy was always very much attached to his mother, and her influence over him was strong; but in this case he regarded her fears as chimerical. The way in which he walked was, to him, so pleasant, and the companions of his journey so delightful, that he could not believe in the prophesied evil; and when his mother talked to him in her warning voice, and with a sad countenance, he smiled at her concern, and made light of [joked about] her fears.

“And so it went on, month after month, and year after year, until the young man's sad declensions [declining morals] were the town talk. In order to throw his mind into a new channel — to awaken, if possible, a new and better interest in life — his father ventured upon the doubtful experiment we spoke of yesterday; that of placing capital in his hands, and making him an equal partner in the business of distilling and cotton-spinning. The disastrous — I might say disgraceful — result you know. The young man squandered his own capital and heavily embarrassed his father [caused his father to lose a lot of money].

“The effect of all this upon Mrs. Hammond has been painful in the extreme. We can only dimly imagine the terrible suffering through which she has passed. Her present aberration was first visible after a long period of sleeplessness, occasioned by distress of mind. During the whole of two weeks, I am told, she did not close her eyes; the most of that time walking the floor of her chamber, and weeping. Powerful anodynes [medicines], frequently repeated, at length brought relief. But, when she awoke from a prolonged period of unconsciousness, the brightness of her reason was gone. Since then, she has never been clearly conscious of what was passing around her, and well for her, I have sometimes thought it was, for even obscurity of intellect is a blessing in her case. Ah, me! I always get the heart-ache, when I think of her.”

“Did not this event startle the young man from his fatal dream, if I may so call his mad infatuation [object of desire or admiration]?” I asked.

“No. He loved his mother, and was deeply afflicted [hurt] by the calamity; but it seemed as if he could not stop. Some terrible necessity appeared to be impelling him onward. If he formed good resolutions [if he tried to improve] — and I doubt not that he did — they were blown away like threads of gossamer [film of cobwebs], the moment he came within the sphere of old associations

[friends and acquaintances]. His way to the mill was by the Sickle and Sheaf; and it was not easy for him to pass there without being drawn into the bar, either by his own desire for drink, or through the invitation of some pleasant companion, who was lounging in front of the tavern.”

...

6. For what audience did Arthur write *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*?

7. What did he hope the novel would achieve?

8. In the excerpt we learn that before the Sickle and Sheaf opened, there was a bar in Cedarville that catered to the “lowest classes.” Why might Arthur have chosen not to set his story there?

9. What does the excerpt suggest about the economic consequences of alcohol consumption?

10. Why did the economic consequences matter to Arthur’s intended audience?

11. What are some of the characteristics of the cult of domesticity that Mrs. Hammond exemplifies? Provide a few examples.

12. How does this passage illustrate the limits of the cult of domesticity?

13. Why does the Sickle and Sheaf pose a special threat to Cedarville?

14. In what way can it be said that the middle class of Cedarville, the upholders of the cult of domesticity, undermine it?

15. What opposing values are represented by the opening of the Sickle and Sheaf?

16. What are some key words in the excerpt that describe Mrs. Hammond's temperament and judgment?

17. How does the portrayal of Mrs. Hammond justify limiting the lives of middle class women to the home?

“Thus it is,” he continued; “and we who see the whole extent, origin, and downward rushing force of a widely sweeping desolation, lift our voices of warning almost in vain. Men who have everything at stake — sons to be corrupted, and daughters to become the wives of young men exposed to corrupting influences — stand aloof, questioning and doubting as to the expediency of protecting the innocent from the wolfish designs of bad men; who, to compass [bring about, achieve] their own selfish ends, would destroy them body and soul. We are called fanatics, ultraists [extremists], designing [plotting], and all that, because we ask our law-makers to stay the fiery ruin. Oh, no! we must not touch the traffic [sale of alcohol]. All the dearest and best interests of society may suffer; but the rum-seller must be protected. He must be allowed to get gain, if the jails and poorhouses are filled, and the graveyards made fat with the bodies of young men stricken down in the flower of their years, and of wives and mothers who have died of broken hearts. Reform, we are told, must commence at home. We must rear temperate children, and then we shall have temperate men. That when there are none to desire liquor, the rum-seller's traffic will cease. And all the while society's true benefactors [reformers] are engaged in doing this [arguing that temperance begins at home], the weak, the unsuspecting, and the erring must be left an easy prey, even if the work requires for its accomplishment a hundred years. Sir! a human soul destroyed through the rum-seller's infernal agency [evil actions], is a sacrifice priceless in value. No considerations of worldly gain can, for an instant, be placed in comparison therewith. And yet souls are destroyed by thousands every year; and they will fall by tens of thousands ere [before] society awakens from its fatal indifference, and lays its strong hand of power on the corrupt men who are scattering disease, ruin, and death, broadcast over the land!”

18. In the final paragraph how does the speaker characterize the harm done by alcohol?

19. According to the speaker, how does society characterize those who want to outlaw the consumption of alcohol?

20. How do his remarks in the final paragraph constitute a criticism of the cult of domesticity?

21. How do they constitute a criticism of capitalism?

Text 3: “[Eliza Jane Thompson](#),” from the film *Prohibition* (PBS)



1884 temperance illustration

22. How does Thompson’s husband express the values of the cult of domesticity?

23. How does Thompson justify her movement beyond the cult of domesticity?

24. How is the action of Thompson and the other Hillsboro protestors at once “an act of radical civil disobedience” and “completely within the parameters [bounds] of accepted female behavior”?

25. What values confront each other at the tavern door? What are the values of the home? the values of the saloon?

26. What role does religion play in the Hillsboro protests?

27. Why might the Women’s Crusade have “taken off like wildfire”? In what ways might it have been a response to something more than opposition to saloons and drinking?

28. What techniques does Eliza Hackett recommend for “conquering a man”? How do they represent a way in which the cult of domesticity empowered women?

29. What eventually causes the Women’s Crusade to fade?

30. What limitations did it encounter?

31. How did it give some women a different perspective on the cult of domesticity?

Vocabulary

derangement: insanity, madness

conversant: familiar, informed

allusion: reference, mention [in this context]

obscured: darkened [in this context]

affliction: hardship, source of suffering

idolatry: extreme admiration, worship of idols

anxiety: worry, dread

anticipations: expectations, predictions

urbanity: charm, sophistication

allurements: temptations, attractions

countenance: approval, support [in this context]

enterprising: inventive, resourceful

fleet: quick

perceptions: judgments

companionable: friendly

proclivities: tendencies

imminent: about to happen

chimerical: imaginary

countenance: look on one's face [in this context]

capital: money used to make money

squandered: wasted

aberration: abnormal condition

calamity: disaster

impelling: driving, forcing

aloof: aside

expediency: usefulness

gain: profit, money

commence: begin

temperate: moderate, having self-control; [in this context: not drinking alcohol]

indifference: lack of concern

Images

- T. S. Arthur, *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*, 1854, frontispiece, detail. Novel in the public domain; digital image courtesy of Internet Archive.
- Photograph of two men presumably sleeping off a drunken spree in Manhattan (New York City), 1892, photograph titled "Kentucky Whiskey" by Julius Wilcox, 1892. Brooklyn Public Library, Brooklyn Collection, Call No. WILC 0115. Reproduced by permission.
- Illustration captioned "Through the constant use of liquor he loses, at times, all control of himself and in one of these moments kills his wife," print (tinted lithograph), 1884. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-65026.