Cult of Domesticity
1820s - Civil War
• The Cult of Domesticity was also known as the Cult of True Womanhood.
• Began in 1820s and was a major movement in the United States until the civil war
• The Cult was an ideology that created a new idea about the role of women in society.
• It was founded on the theory of scientific sexism and the fact that nineteenth-century women were considered to be both physically and mentally inferior to men.

• Popular saying of the time: "A woman has a head almost too small for intellect but just big enough for love." From Barbra Welters’ well known text, *The Cult of True Womanhood*.

• The Cult established separate spheres of influence for men and women, but it was truly a product of the changes in society in the early 1800s.
Previous Influences

• There were only a very small percentage of women who could escape the drudgery of cooking, spinning, weaving, childrearing, and cleaning to pursue other activities.

• The men were not spared hard work, but their days consisted of employment out in the fields, at sea, or in mines.

• The stay at home nature of women's work fostered the idea that women were unfit for strenuous labor.
The monotony of household chores led to the assumption that women were unsuited for intellectual thought, much less any occupation requiring high intelligence.

Since the underlying economic realities of traditional agricultural life had not changed substantially since Biblical days, it was easy for people (mostly men) to claim that the nature of women's work was something that had been ordained by God.
• It did not take much of a step in logic to go from that claim to the ideology that any attempt on women's part to move out of the household was sacrilege and a deliberate desecration of God's holy order.
Justification

• **FIRST ARGUMENT**: women were physically inferior to men.
• Their lesser upper body strength was seen as a proof that they were not fit to work outside the home.
• Clearly women were not as strong as men, but jobs requiring extreme physical labor were not what women would have wanted. Somehow, the rather obvious logic of this fact did not prevent the promoters of the Cult from using the "female as the weaker sex" argument.
• This use of scientific sexism was characteristic of the Cult and people used this particular argument for gains in unrelated areas.

• Another problem that came out of this argument was the fact that women’s sickness was treated incorrectly.
  – Postpartum depression was a major problem at this time, but doctors treated it as if the women were not really sick. They were confined to their rooms and not allowed any contact with the outside world, which made the depression even worse.
• **SECOND ARGUMENT:** Women are intellectually inferior to men because their brains are smaller.

• In the nineteenth century, scientists did not understand, for instance, that women use their brains more efficiently than men or that mere brain size is not a major factor in intelligence.

• Lack of logic did not keep the argument from being made or believed in on a large scale.
  
  – The view of intellectual inferiority was commonly held in the 1800’s and can be observed in an article from the *New England Quarterly Magazine* (1802). “A Father’s Inquiries Relative to the Education of Daughters” outlined what was considered to be an appropriate plan for educating a girl in the nineteenth century.
• It identified what men in this time period thought women needed to know.

• Activities that were considered suitable were drawing, painting, music instruction, and novel reading.
  – The suggestion that the daughter should not exceed the quota of one novel in six months and the fact that she was encouraged to read each one two or three times “in order to understand the moral lessons implied” clearly demonstrates the fact that women were looked-down upon as intellectual inferiors.
• **THIRD ARGUMENT**: the line of reasoning that women are emotionally unstable and therefore not suited to work outside the home.

• It is true that women's hormonal cycles are more complex than men's and it is also true that women's emotional lives are more intense than most men's, but neither of these things makes women unsuited to work outside the home.

• The ideology of the Cult was never designed to establish the truth, but instead to keep a social and Cultural practice of homebound women alive.
• The reasons that the Cult came about and the ways it was justified can be directly observed in its ideals.
• The Cult taught women how to behave in the new age.
• The Cult of Domesticity had four characteristics that any good and proper young woman should try to achieve.
• This ideal of womanhood had essentially four parts:
  – piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness.
  – It was Barbra Welters who originally established these ideas, but they have since evolved into a commonly known slogan for the Cult.
Piety

• The first ideal, piety, or religion, was the core of woman's virtue, the source of her strength.
• Young men looking for a mate were cautioned to search first for piety because it was believed that if a woman had religion, all else would fall into place.
• The woman of the nineteenth century was believed to be the “new Eve” and to bring the world out of its suffering through her pure and passionate love.
• She was thought to be working with God to help the world in any way she could, therefore religion was thought to be a good thing in a woman.
• Furthering religion in the woman’s sphere, the home, was an important characteristic for any wife and/or mother to posses.

• Men of this time taught that making a woman a handmaiden of God would increase her “value,” for a lack of religion was considered the worst human characteristic.
• Caleb Atwater, writing in *The Ladies Repository*, expressed the idea that the Lord should be very prominent in woman’s life. He said, "Religion is exactly what a woman needs, for it gives her that dignity that best suits her dependence." And Mrs. John Sanford... agreed thoroughly saying: "Religion is just what a woman needs. Without it she is ever restless and unhappy…”

• These writers believed that it was better for a woman to pray then to think.
Purity

• Without sexual purity, a woman was no woman, but rather a lower form of being, a "fallen woman," unworthy of the love from a man and unfit for their company.

• The loss of purity was seen as to be guilty of a crime in the woman’s magazines of the time.

• It could bring madness or even death to an impure woman.

• The marriage night was seen as the greatest night in a woman’s life and to lose any value of that brought tears and hysteria to many young women. A woman’s virginity was seen as the greatest gift to give to her new husband.
• There were numerous stories told to scare women into keeping their virginity, stories of unwed mothers being punished by God for their sin by losing their babies and going mad.

• Female purity was also viewed as a weapon. It could be used by women to keep men in control of their sexual needs and desires, for their own good.
Submissiveness

- The third ideal brought about during the Cult of Domesticity was submissiveness.
- Seen as the most feminine of virtues, women were to be passive bystanders, submitting to fate, to duty, to God, and to most importantly, men.
- Men were seen as the protectors, the doers, and the actors in life.
• Women were to wear tight corsets, pinching her inner organs together, and numerous undergarments, limiting their mobility.
• It was believed that a true woman knew her place and knew when it was the right time for her to speak.
Domesticity

• Finally, the fourth ideal of the Cult of Domesticity was, in fact, domesticity.
• This represented a belief that a woman’s place was in the home.
• Housework was deemed to be an uplifting and rewarding task for a woman.
• Women were expected to uphold the values of stability, morality, and democracy by making the home a safe haven for her husband and children.
• The home was to be a place were her husband could escape from his office and work and come home to relax and not to be bothered.
• This idea left women feeling stuck and enclosed in their own home. They were required to make their house a safe-haven for their families, but had nowhere that was designed to make them happy.

• The home was no longer valued for its function in the community, or its economic productiveness, as in the era when all work was done in the home, but rather for its isolation from the community and its service to its members.

• The woman should serve as the angel of the house, spreading all the positive influence she possessed to her family.
Effects of the Cult

- The Cult had a profound effect on the day-to-day lives of most women in the nineteenth-century.
- One of the easiest ways to see this is in the women’s literature of the day.
- Women’s magazines were criticized for being aimed at twelve-year-olds, but what these critics failed to recognize was that since women’s education ended at fourteen.
- Ignorance was appealing to most men, furthering the idea that women were inferior.
• Another major part of women’s life was the use of “how-to” guides.

• Most women relied on these books to gain insight into how they could fulfill their roles as dictated by the Cult.

  – *The Godey’s Lady’s Book*. Published in 1850, it provided women with fashion tips and poems designed to teach them about the importance of being docile and following the Cult’s ideals. Every issue also contained illustrations, dance steps, and sheet music.
Roles for Women

- Since another crucial part of each woman’s life was to serve as a caretaker, she had little time for herself.
- All of her efforts went towards attempts to better her home and family life.
- For pleasure, the nineteenth-century woman would learn new ways to make her household duties more efficient, as explained by Catherine Beecher Stowe in her 1842 text, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*.
  - She also described the fact that “the drudgery of the kitchen [was] dirty work... [but] when ladies managed such things, as ladies should, such associations would be removed.”
  - This reflected the idea that the home was the woman’s world and she could make it elegant and refined.
• Women were expected to clean, cook, do laundry, raise children, provide comfort to their husbands, be entertainers, and establish the sanctity of the home. These menial tasks caused women to feel inadequate and oppressed.

• They had no power, only the status of their husbands. In the late nineteenth century only 18% of women worked outside their house.

• They were expected to stay home and not pursue their own careers.

• This ultimately led to women’s desires to break out of their spheres in the form of the Women’s Rights movement.
Problems with the Cult

- Women no longer felt empowered by their status; instead they were limited.
- Initially, the feminist movement accepted the Cult’s ideals as a necessary separation of men and women’s roles, but women slowly began to feel oppressed by their specific sphere.
- During the peak time of the Cult of Domesticity, men saw women as being worthless in the business world. This later contributed to the perception of women not being able to work as hard as men.
- Coming out of this period, women were not given the same opportunities as men were.
• They were deemed fragile and not hard working.
• Another major problem was the fact that as women aged, they lost even more of their power and influence.
• While men could still maintain their status, women had no possibility of upward mobility and remained solely dependent on their husbands. In the years to follow, women would go through painstaking rallies and strikes to gain certain rights only available to men.
• Today, we are still struggling with equal rights for men and women. For every dollar a man makes, a woman makes seventy cents.
Conclusion

• By the time Americans had the civil war, huge amounts of pressure had been put on women and their roles.

• They were stuck inside the home doing traditional work and were expected to make their house a sanctuary for their husbands.

• The fact that they were put in a position where they could only perform unfulfilling jobs caused nineteenth-century women to seek an escape in the form of occupations outside the home and in the political world.
• The ideas of separate spheres and distinct roles for men and women, however, did not end with the civil war and the end of the period of strength of the Cult.
• These ideas and their effects can still be seen in the way society functions today and the way women are viewed.