Women’s Sphere and the Emergence of the Women’s Rights Movement

We often view the nineteenth century as fundamentally defined by its traditional notion of gender roles, especially as embodied in the cult of domesticity. While the identification of the women’s sphere within the home had deep roots in Western culture, and such identification was central to dominant thinking about gender for centuries, domestic ideology was a particular historical development that emerged in the early decades of the nineteenth century, and over time it had ambivalent implications for women. Domestic ideology, or the cult of domesticity, can be defined as a series of related ideas that characterized the family home as the particular domain of the woman, that idealized the woman in the home (the angel in house) as the center of spiritual and moral goodness for the nuclear family, and that based these ideas in the belief that women were innately weaker—both physically and intellectually—and less capable of taking care of themselves in the rough and tumble public sphere. Thus, women needed constant protection. Domestic ideology raised women up as naturally more religious and moral, giving them a special place within society, even as it demeaned them by tying that superiority to their incapacity within the public world and to their restrained sexuality.

As promulgated by a wide array of advice literature, sermons, novels, periodicals, and scientific writing, the ideas at the core of domestic ideology strictly defined the public and private spheres in terms of gender. Women properly remained in the private, domestic sphere, because they were physically frailer and morally less resilient to the amoral, if not immoral, struggles that defined the public realm of the economy and politics. This identification of women with the domestic sphere as a moral redoubt against the ethically questionable entanglements and temptations of the public world reinforced a sexual double standard. Where women’s sexual purity—defined in terms of their virginity—had been a long-standing social concern, domestic ideology emphasized the importance of a woman’s resistance to sexual desires as essential to her primary role as moral defender of the nuclear family. This emphasis on women remaining above sexual desires led to the pathologization of the women’s libido even as it excused, to some extent, men’s inability to control their own sexual urges. For a woman to have sexual desires was unnatural, and women expressing sexual urges were deemed to be sick. It was the woman’s role to help constrain men’s sexuality and to provide a safe outlet for it, limited to the marriage bed.

In this way, domestic ideology envisioned the home as a bulwark against those immoral forces in the larger world, imagining the family—centered around the wife/mother—as providing the moral center and spiritual fuel that would allow the husband/father to pursue economic ventures in the wider world and that would prepare children for that world. As such, the nuclear family rather than extended networks of kin began to be seen as the primary site of individual identification and socialization. As such, the woman in the home—and the idea of a private self connected to that home—became an essential component of changing ideas that would accept the role of a selfish, hyper-competitive, market-oriented public world. As much as the gendered distinction between the home and the public has roots stretching far back in Western
history, domestic ideology needs to be seen in relation to the development of a market economy and the changing place and nature of work. Prior to the nineteenth century—and throughout much of that century—economic production was centered in the home through the home being contiguous with the farm, where much economic production still took place, or through artisanal workshops, small shops, or the small-scale production of items for sale (textiles, foodstuffs, etc.) that were located in the home. With increased urbanization, the development of the factory system and a shift away from artisanal production, and the emergence of a middle-class with leisure time, the home came to be defined economically not in terms of production but in terms of consumption.

While domestic ideology implied that all women should live more retired, reserved lives, devoted to the apparently light labor of taking care of the home for the men who entered into the economic world, the reality for most women—especially lower-class women and women of color—was far different. Many women began to or continued to work outside of the home as domestic workers as well as factory operatives, especially in the textile industry. For these women, domestic ideology’s ideal of the household angel being protected from laboring outside the home remained merely a dream. Yet in the rising middle class and the upper classes, the women’s sphere became linked more to leisure or consumption. Middle-class American families increasingly relied on goods produced outside of the home for their daily lives, and American men increasingly worked away from their homes. Thus, in general women began to be seen more in terms of their leisure activity or in terms of their work in making the home a hospitable, relaxing refuge apart from the public sphere. One mark of this turn to leisure was the burgeoning market in periodicals, novels, and domestic manuals for women readers. These texts, in turn, helped to reinforce the strict distinctions in gendered spheres associated with domestic ideology and thus helped to foster these developments.

Domestic ideology and some of its core ideas both provided the foundation for the emergence of feminism in the nineteenth century and embodied the concepts much feminist thought attempted to challenge. In the years following the Revolution, a number of American women, most notably Judith Sargent Murray, followed their better-known English counterpart Mary Wollstonecraft in arguing for the extension of Enlightenment precepts about human freedom and individual development to women. In “On the Equality of the Sexes” (1790), for example, Murray attacks the sexual double-standard, cleverly using it as a way to argue that society already accords women a great deal of strength. She builds on that idea to contend for women having greater access to education, focusing on their rational capacities as implicitly being acknowledged by society. In part, her argument can be read as part of what has been described as “republican motherhood,” a shift in emphasis following the Revolution, where women’s role in shaping the next generation came to be seen as key to developing the virtuous electorate necessary for the American experiment in self-government to succeed. From Murray’s position, for women to fulfill this role, they had to have equal access to education and had to be free to develop their minds as fully as they could. Murray does not, as later American women writers would, insist on opening political and professional doors for women but rather keeps her focus largely on
educational, intellectual, and spiritual opportunities in terms of self-improvement and self-development.

While mid-nineteenth-century women would similarly emphasize women’s rational and intellectual potential in arguing for social change, one of the immediate grounds for the emergence of a more developed movement for women’s rights was domestic ideology’s emphasis on women as embodying and protecting society’s moral needs. The mid-nineteenth-century women’s rights movement grew directly out of other reform movements, most notably the temperance movement, abolitionism, and campaigns against prostitution. Based on domestic ideology’s emphasis on women’s moral and spiritual capacity, if not superiority, many women came to feel empowered to speak about social ills that they felt directly impacted the moral condition of the home. Alcohol abuse and alcoholism were incredibly wide-spread, as the drinking of alcohol was fully integrated into the everyday lives of most Americans, beginning at a fairly early age. As work became more disciplined in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, more Americans began to view alcohol as the leading cause of many social ills, from prostitution to spousal abuse to financial ruin. Women and children often bore the brunt of these problems, and women took a leading role in the growth of the temperance movement over the course of the nineteenth century.

While temperance and efforts to stamp out prostitution brought many women into the public sphere, it was abolitionism that most firmly launched the women’s rights movement. Women such as Angelina Grimké, Sarah Grimké, and Abby Kelley became vocal critics of slavery in the 1830s. Many in the anti-slavery movement questioned the propriety of women speaking in public, and some attempted to silence these women, but others, such as William Lloyd Garrison, embraced their advocacy on behalf of the slaves. In 1838, Angelina Grimké became the first woman to address an American legislative body (the Massachusetts legislature), and as the abolitionist movement grew, more women began to connect the sufferings and limitations that slaves faced to their own lives. Women, especially married women, had few to no rights. While some states began to change these laws in the antebellum period, laws of coverture—meaning that the married woman’s legal standing was covered by her husband—predominated. That meant that a married woman could not own property on her own, make her own will, or make legal claims on behalf of herself or her children. The emphasis for most abolitionist-feminists in the 1830s and 1840s was on moral suasion, trying to persuade men to change their hearts so that they could begin to change social mores and behavior. While there was some agitation for legal changes and for expanding women’s economic and social opportunities, much of the focus was on creating and fostering equality in marital relationships.

By the late 1840s the focus of women’s rights advocates was shifting. At the Seneca Fall Convention in 1848, a meeting often seen as inaugurating the modern women’s rights movement in the United States, the delegates issued a Declaration of Sentiments, modeled on the Declaration of Independence. After long debate over a resolution put forward by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the delegates narrowly passed this resolution, which called for women’s suffrage. This turn to political rights marked a change in the movement for women’s equality. In the early 1800s, many, if not most, white American adult men did not have the right to vote, due to property requirements in
most states. By the 1840s, however, that had changed, and universal white adult male suffrage was the standard not the exception. The inclusion of suffrage in the demands of women’s rights advocates mirrored this expansion of suffrage. Suffrage would become the key issue in the women’s rights movement for the next 70 years and would become a central point of contention in the post-Civil War years as the link between feminism and abolitionism began to disintegrate over disagreements of whether freed slaves or white women deserved the vote more.

The intricate relationship between the development of the women’s rights movement and the domestic ideology it largely questioned can help us to make sense of the complex appeals and politics of literature by women novelists during this period. Women authored the most popular novels of the mid-nineteenth century. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851-52), Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), and Maria Cummins’s *The Lamplighter* (1854) are often cited as the three best-selling novels of the period. This popularity pushed these writers into the public limelight, but in presenting their works, they frequently revealed a deep ambivalence about becoming publicly recognized. Their works depicted true women as eschewing the public sphere, and in their letters to publishers and fans they recognized their own transgressive behavior in entering into the public sphere, apologizing for doing so on the grounds of helping their families or, in the case of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, responding to a moral quandary that invaded the domestic sphere. These works often appear to accede to domestic ideology’s most sexist notions—that women are innately weaker, that they must subordinate themselves to male authorities in order to find their proper place in the world, and that any romantic feelings at all suggestive of sexuality are potentially destructive. Yet, these works also represent the extent to which women inhabited a perilous position within their society due to these notions and their institutionalization. Some works, such as Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall* and Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, increasingly and more explicitly questioned domestic ideology, even as some of its core tenets—most prominently the woman’s central role to the well-being of the family and her task of ensuring society’s morality—remained central to the accounts of their heroines’ struggles.