

THE CULT OF DOMESTICITY IN THE GILDED AGE  
—A Sketch—

by  
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God is for men and religion for women.  
Joseph Conrad (1857-1924)

The use of the word cult is in its religious context. The ideal domestic life as imagined and practiced by Americans in the Gilded Age (c. 1870-1900) had absolutely no basis in human social history, it was a true act of faith. There is no crime, no moral offense, no need for moral judgment, in this act of creation. Every human society has engaged in these created reshaping from time to time. It is in our nature to recreate ourselves, our cultures. Often such a recreation has nothing more than myth at its foundation. Such is the case here.

Humanity has been around for a long time. In the long years of our infancy, we were shaped by evolution and the dictates of hunter-gatherer existence. Hundreds of thousands of years of toil in field and pasture passed before the rise of complex urban life. Between the invention of civilization and our time stand still further millennia. In all that time, no fundamental duality of family and society, of "inside" and "outside" existed. There was certainly no nuclear family.

The nuclear family, a husband, wife, and children living apart, isolated, did not

exist for much of human history. Hunter-gatherer bands were organized on a clan or tribal basis, with multiple generations in the same group. A child would be surrounded by aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, and even grandparents. The parents and their children were part of a larger, layered whole. Marriage was probably practiced even at this early date (to judge by modern survivals of hunter-gatherer bands), but that is not the nuclear family.

The invention of agriculture tended to reinforce the generational family and the unity of the community. Everyone worked. Large families were a blessing to farmers. Only by cooperative multigenerational work could the farming community succeed. The isolated farm family was largely the creation of the unique circumstances of the settlement of America, not a standard human farming practice. There was no "inside" and "outside," no restricted cultural space reserved for the nuclear family that served as a refuge from the outside world. Life was an integrated whole.

Humans have always shaped their own cultural environments. Very few of our numberless cultural innovations could be called natural or inevitable. The generational family is more common than most and has the deepest roots, but even it is not universal. Neither is the nuclear family, though men and women and their children have often shared the same cultural space. Even this is not universal. The Ancient Greeks and some Islamic cultures isolated women, kept them separate from the rest of the household. In some instances they even dined and slept separately (some still do). Usually the generational family pattern was followed even when humans became urban, city-oriented creatures. The nearest equivalent to "inside" and "outside" that comes to mind is the ideal Roman house, turned away from the street, but a household lived "inside" is not a nuclear family.

The truly artificial, invented nature of the 19th Century American domestic cult now becomes apparent. To embrace this cult involved a leap of faith; to embrace this cult was to discover a source of emotional shelter in a changing world; to embrace this cult was to embrace a sense of order.

The cult focused on the home and the wife. She became the priestess of the

Home, the source of the defining sacraments of the Home. She was the maintainer, the civilizer, the organizer, the controller, and the idol. The wife, the mother either oversaw or performed the household cleaning, the cooking, the organization of all household activities, and even was the focus of family social events. The husband, the father may have sat in the high chair, may have been the formal, titular head of the house; yet it was the wife who played the organ, led the songs, ornamented the parlor, and organized the evening dinner. Sumerians would have recognized such ritual relationships. Four thousand years ago, their kings were required to marry the high priestesses, the controllers of the state cult (or as least so says my memory of *Gilgamesh*). The family depended upon the wife to reinforce its values, its ethos.

The interior of the home was the temple precinct, the sacred place that must be protected from the profane exterior reality. It had to be separate, isolated, pulled away from the world. The front door of the house, the entrance to the home, became a social airlock, with rituals for entry and exit as profound as those of an astronaut about to go EVA or the Second Temple in Jerusalem. The physical elements of the entrance reinforced the transition, the airlock effect. Strangers were held in this transition zone, their interactions limited to a calling card left in a special tray. The furniture served as devices to prepare the family member for confrontation with the outside: to check appearance in a mirror, suit up in coat and hat, equipped with umbrella or winter gear, as was the case. Strangers were "disinfected," rendered harmless, "compressed up" to the pressure of the home; family members were suited up and "decompressed" for exit into the world.

The message was clear: this is a place for the family. They were the chosen of this cult, only they were allowed unrestricted access onto the temple grounds. The temple of the home was sacred, to be protected. By this, the family, the individual cult members, were themselves protected from the constant flux and buffeting of the outside world.

The outside had become a dangerous place. The United States during the Gilded Age was in the midst of profound demographic changes. The country was rapidly

becoming urban and industrial. Over the course of less than thirty years, many states that had been less than 20% urban in population became 60 to 80% urban. This was exacerbated by a technological push that had accelerated change in American society. Fewer farmers could produce more as a result of innovations such as the McCormick reaper. They could deliver their products to more people at further distance through the railroads. The railroads facilitated the mass movement of commodities and people. Fledgling industries expanded overnight into vast empires employing thousands. This only pushed these vast, unsettling changes forward even faster. Large waves of immigrants washed ashore, the act of immigration having broken them off from their generational families in the Old Country. This was also true of internal immigration. Americans have had a rambling nature since the end of the Civil War.

The domestic cult was a response to these disruptive changes to the social order. The cult of the home reinforced the nuclear family's need for a domestic refuge. The breakup of the generational family in America was accepted, even institutionalized by the cult; the nuclear family was condoned as the natural, normal shape of families. The domestic cult was a way of ordering chaos, taming change, keeping it at arm's length. It was their response to future shock, their solution to the need to find a way to ride that shockwave into the future. When its job was done, it disappeared.

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A short essay written years ago, provided as example of my nonfiction work, and for the fun of it. Not to be used without my permission.

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