

Introduction

The title of this study joins two heretofore rarely linked traditions: nineteenth-century domestic ideology and possessive individualism. In proposing this conjunction I mean to illuminate the character and function of the nineteenth-century rise of domesticity as a development within the history of individualism. To see domestic ideology as a passage in liberal humanism is not simply to acknowledge the historical and philosophical contexts of this ideology of femininity and personal life. This historicization also, and to my mind more significantly, demonstrates the role of domestic ideology in updating and reshaping individualism within nineteenth-century American market society.

It is the organizing premise of this book that nineteenth-century American individualism takes on its peculiarly “individualistic” properties as domesticity inflects it with values of interiority, privacy, and psychology. I shall be concerned with these domestic dimensions of individualism and individualistic functions of domesticity as they appear primarily but not exclusively in 1850s’ novels, stories, and essays by Stowe, Hawthorne, and Melville, as well as in other cultural forms and practices such as abolitionism, interior decorating, architecture, mesmerism, communitarian reform, child-rearing, and even illness. Reading these various forms as definitions and redefinitions of selfhood reveals a self continually under construction, or at least renovation. And the materials that become the features of the self—its properties—thus represent

a history of proprietorship and invention, the processes of ownership and production sustaining the self.

The reconstructions of the individual analyzed in the readings that follow assume, extend, and sometimes alter the logic of possessive individualism. C. B. Macpherson has identified the “possessive” nature of the individualism associated with the rise of the liberal democratic state. According to this concept of self evolving from the seventeenth century, every man has property in himself and thus the right to manage himself, his labor, and his property as he wishes. As Macpherson stresses, this is a market society’s construction of self, a self aligned with market relations such as exchange value, alienability, circulation, and competition.¹ Though the term *individualism* does not come into use until the late 1820s,² when market society and forms of the modern liberal state are well established, the principles it encompasses were already instated. That is, by the mid-eighteenth century the notion of individual rights promulgated in the political philosophies of Hobbes and Locke comprised an article of cultural faith. Drawing on this tradition, the American Declaration of Independence and the Constitution extended property rights to include self-representation and designed a government which would protect this democratic right to self-determination.

Welded to the market activities generally available only to white men, possessive individualism obviously reflects a masculine selfhood. Yet in the nineteenth century, this form of individualism comes to be associated with the feminine sphere of domesticity.

Visiting the United States in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville observed disapprovingly that American democracy nurtured an individual whose “feelings are turned in upon himself.” Tocqueville elaborated the domestic accents of this self-interest: “Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the rest of society to take care of itself.”³ What concerns Tocqueville here is what he takes to be the withdrawal from political and civic responsibilities that underwrites individualism—its domestic constitution. I shall return later to his

assumptions about the isolationism of domesticity; for the moment I want to pursue how Tocqueville's characterization of domesticity as a withdrawn "little society" to which "feeling" "disposes" the individual echoes the nineteenth-century rhetoric of home as a "haven in a heartless world."⁴

The domestic circle in which Tocqueville locates American individualism emerged as a sphere of individuality in tandem with market economy expansion. Domestic ideology with its discourse of personal life proliferates alongside this economic development which removed women from the public realm of production and redirected men to work arenas increasingly subject to market contingencies. To counter "this perpetually fluctuating state of society," Catharine Beecher exhorted women to "sustain a prosperous domestic state."⁵ The domestic doctrine Beecher helped to define held women and the home as the embodiment and the environment of stable value. Maintaining a site of permanent value, the domestic cult of true womanhood facilitated the transition to a life increasingly subject to the caprices of the market. The confidence of encomiums to the virtues of womanhood and home simultaneously sublimated and denied anxieties about unfamiliar and precarious socioeconomic conditions and about the place of the individual within those conditions. In the midst of change the domestic sphere provided an always identifiable place and refuge for the individual: it signified the private domain of individuality apart from the marketplace.⁶

What I am calling domestic individualism thus denotes a self-definition secured in and nearly synonymous with domesticity. The nineteenth-century self-definitions this book explores locate the individual in his or her interiority, in his or her removal from the marketplace. Hence Stowe can identify the fate of slaves and the power of women with the state of home, political economy with domestic economy. Hawthorne likewise imagines good housekeeping as self-protective and revivifying. From a somewhat different perspective, Melville alternately images domestic influence as self-constricting and as not self-constricting enough. This theme is taken up by Charlotte Perkins Gilman at the end of the century in "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Women and Economics*,

which critique the domestic confinement of women and advocate their free circulation in spheres of their choosing. Although the feminist critique of domestic ideology rejects the situation of women in the home, it nonetheless retains in its aspirations for women's enfranchisement and self-determination the domestic definition of self. Arguing in 1892 for woman suffrage, Elizabeth Cady Stanton reproduces this composite of the individual when she aligns women's "birthright to self-sovereignty" with the fundamental "solitude of self" "our republican idea" of "the individuality of each human soul" constitutes. Nowhere is the tradition of self-proprietorship more alive than in Stanton's belief that "to deny the rights of property is like cutting off the hands."⁷ The faculties of hands, which dictionary definitions list as those of grasping, producing, possessing, controlling, and authorizing, recapitulate the proprietary character of individualism.

Since domesticity secures this character for the individual, its selective allotment of rights and places in society is the real target of the feminist domestic critique. This means that women in the nineteenth century are in the peculiar position of wanting to be in a sphere they already both do and do not inhabit. For if the individual rights Stanton wants for women—"the rights of property," "political equality," "credit in the marketplace," "recompense in the world of work," "a voice in choosing those who make and administer the law"—by definition reside in domesticity,⁸ the domestic sphere seems, then, to be the best place for women. The domestic confinement feminists protest should guarantee the democratic rights they want. This is precisely the logical maneuver by which opponents of woman suffrage were able to argue that women's rights existed in their domestic sphere, rationalizing the illogic of women's disenfranchisement by appealing to the entitling function of domesticity.

What the feminist movement for women's political and economic autonomy highlights, therefore, is the sexual division of individualism within domesticity.⁹ This domain is at once the separate sphere of women and the correlative to, as well as the basis of, men's individuality. It is thus the case that the nineteenth century advanced and delimited individualism by identifying self-

hood with the feminine but denying it to women. What women wanted was, quite literally, themselves. This paradoxical feminization of self that excludes as it encompasses women shapes the well-worn gender distinctions deeded to us by the nineteenth century. The measure of its success as a model of the subject can be indicated by the persistence with which the domestic and the individualistic have figured in American literary tradition as antinomies, despite Tocqueville's recognition of their alignment.

Individualism and domesticity have both long figured as the-
matics of nineteenth-century American culture, but as distinct and
oppositional trajectories. Thus two disparate literary movements
seem to emerge in the 1850s: on the one hand the American Re-
naissance, represented in the "classic" works of Emerson, Whit-
man, Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe;¹⁰ and on the other hand the
Other American Renaissance, inscribed in the works of Stowe and
such writers as Susan Warner, Fanny Fern, Harriet Wilson, and
Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, who are only recently receiving the crit-
ical attention long given their white male contemporaries.¹¹

This gender division has persisted with remarkable neatness and
clarity throughout American literary criticism. Recall how myths
of the origins of American culture describe second-generation
Adamic and oedipal stories: new Edens, sons in exile, estrange-
ment from women. According to Leslie Fiedler, "the figure of Rip
Van Winkle presides over the birth of the American imagination,
and it is fitting that our first successful home-grown legend me-
morialize, however playfully, the flight of the dreamer from the
shrew."¹² In this androcentric, if not misogynist, account of
American culture, literature records the battle between the mas-
culine desire for freedom and the feminine will toward civilization:
the runaway Huck Finn versus the "sivilizing" Widow Douglas.
The paradigm of the dreamer's flight from the shrew defines the
domestic as a pole from which the individual must escape in order
to establish and preserve his identity. Huck lights out for the
territory in order to avoid what Ann Douglas calls "the femini-
zation of American culture," to flee from the widow's sentimental
values that epitomize, in Henry Nash Smith's words, "an ethos of
conformity."¹³

Feminist reinterpretations of the domestic dispute this scenario by reversing its terms, making the domestic figure herself a runaway, a rebel. According to the new feminist literary history, women figured in the American imagination not as shrews to be dreamed away, but as producers and embodiments of the American dream of personal happiness. In the feminist exegesis of American cultural archetypes, the housewife, whom the prototypical canonical literature (and criticism) would evade, signifies a reformist rather than conformist ethos. As the Angel in the House, the woman at home exemplified ideal values and presided over a superior, moral economy. In sentimental literature, as Nina Baym puts it, "Domesticity is set forth as a value scheme for ordering all of life, in competition with the ethos of money and exploitation that is perceived to prevail in American society." Dedicated to "overturning the male money system as the law of American life," domesticity constitutes an alternative to, and escape from, the masculine economic order.¹⁴

Against the self-interest of the typically male individualism Tocqueville analyzed, the subculture women image is based on self-denial and collectivity—the ethos of sympathy customarily and disparagingly called sentimentalism. In this view, women thus claim and typify an anti-market (if not anti-masculine) individualism. Contrary to Tocqueville's narrow account of domesticity as the depoliticization of the individual, such domestic novels as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* demonstrate that the alignment between individualism and domesticity might structure dispositions other than self-interest, such as self-denial and self-protection.

Building upon and complicating feminist revisionary treatments of domestic ideology in the first part of this book, I trace through "Stowe's Domestic Reformations" a nineteenth-century update of possessive individualism, the domestic enclosure of the rights of women and blacks. But my argument in these chapters, as well as in the others that engage other aspects of self-sovereignty in literature not generally considered "domestic," contextualizes rather than confirms the feminist reversal of canonical theories of American literature.

Indeed, as I have been thus far suggesting, the feminist resto-

ration of a domestic reform tradition displays the limitations of a masculinist critical practice, but hardly amounts to a reversal of nineteenth-century American male individualism. For the account of market manhood to which domestic reformers object images a self by definition already domesticated, insofar as its character is secured and authenticated by the domestic ideology of home. Conceived as withdrawn to himself, the individual shares the definitive principle of domesticity: its withdrawal from the marketplace. While women's deployment of domestic ideology directs it to genuinely reformist ends and counters prevailing dispositions of power that disenfranchise women, their domestic reforms, instead of projecting an antithetical model of selfhood, further domesticate an already domesticated selfhood. Moreover, as will become manifest in the readings of Hawthorne and Melville, the androcentric bias in American literary criticism is integrally related to and rooted in domestic ideology. To think of the domestic as reformist or revolutionary, therefore, is to register only one of its operations.

Focusing on texts in dialogue with their immediate culture and their larger cultural traditions, I mean to demonstrate a scope of domestic ideology hitherto unacknowledged even by feminist studies that link the domestic to a conception of female selfhood. Far from an account of the female subject, domesticity signifies a feminization of selfhood in service to an individualism most available to (white) men. This means that domesticity doubly binds, in obviously different ways, men and women, blacks and whites, to the same self-definition. From various perspectives and to varying degrees, nineteenth-century American literature reflects and helps to shape or alter this definition. I therefore make no attempt to distinguish between classic and feminist or revisionary American literary canons. I have chosen texts that may or may not fit these categories (in some cases previously unread materials) for their various expositions of the problematic of domestic individualism.

My study provides no schematic configuration or specific theory of American literature. Rather, it emphasizes the convergence of literary works with social practices as a way of underscoring the depth and breadth of imaginative work that literary artifacts and

social formations such as domesticity and its representations perform. The readings I present, though generally historical, are occasionally also speculative, moving forward in time, sometimes into the present. In the final chapter, for example, I read “Bartleby the Scrivener” alongside “The Yellow Wallpaper” and an 1870 story from *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, explicating the agoraphobic logic of these fictions, which anticipates our contemporary accounts of both agoraphobia and anorexia. By relating the connections among these various forms and by pursuing these relations across centuries, I mean to suggest, not just the imaginative productivity of domesticity, but the cultural endurance of domestic individualism and the power of American literature in promoting that tradition.

I have weighted this book with an insistence on convergences, on affiliations and shared identities such as the rather striking affinities between housekeeping and abolitionism, interior decorating and racism, architecture and romance, mesmerism and commerce, cannibalism and literary relations, anorexia and anti-consumerism. This generally deconstructionist approach obviously does not do away with distinctions as it uncovers the affinities among different categories. My emphasis is not meant in any way to deny differences, whether generic, racial, sexual, economic, or political, but to illuminate how the deployment of difference—in this case, the sexual and spatial divisions domestic ideology engendered—operates and gains force by concealing the common purposes that different or even oppositional objects or practices serve. In other words, I am interested in how domestic ideology, as a system of differences, works to maintain cultural coherence through differences.

At the same time, however, the fact that domestic ideology helps form cultural coherence does not mean that it represents a monolithic design. The domestic construction of individualism, as my readings will indicate, reflects myriad interests and historical particulars. For example, domesticity in the context of nineteenth-century abolitionism signifies a reformist politics, while in the context of woman’s suffrage it appears as a reactionary institution. Though in these cases domesticity denotes certain political orches-

trations, on the part of abolitionists or misogynists, this book does not unfold a unitary politics of domesticity: no single system emerges in the operations of the domestic. Its effectiveness as a strategy of self is just that: not a totalizing force, but a working machinery, one that has served and continues to serve many purposes.

In the succeeding chapters, the recurrent paradigm of difference that I shall be considering is the distinction between self and market, as well as its variant forms: home/market, body/market, mind/body, work/body.¹⁵ There appear in these discussions themes, terms, and concepts made familiar by cultural critics from Marx to Veblen and from Benjamin to Baudrillard, and by psychoanalytic theorists from Freud to Lacan. Revisions and critiques of both these traditions, by contemporary feminists such as Sarah Kofman and Luce Irigaray, as well as by new materialists such as Elaine Scarry, Walter Benn Michaels, and Susan Stewart, also hover over and shape my readings of nineteenth-century domestic artifacts. These various (and sometimes vastly different) interpretive enterprises figure in my study not as theories that authorize my reading practice but as themselves practices, that is, as engagements with and formulations of the same problematics of self-definition I am treating. Moreover, one aim of my representational history of the domestic is to suggest some ways that domestic formations have worked to set in place the conceptions of identity and work that materialists and psychoanalysts have classified and theorized.

As this book explores how the individual and ideas of the individual incorporate economic realities, the vocabularies of economic and psychoanalytic analyses often merge. The conventional limits of such terms as economy, psychology, or domesticity mark the delineations between public and private life that domestic ideology so effectively implements. Indeed, the domestic processes through which the nineteenth-century individual internalized as well as distinguished himself from market capitalism dissolve the definition of economy as the political economy in which the individual lives. In my presentation of the cohabitation of the individual with the economic, material conditions and men-

tal states accordingly coalesce. Chapter 3, for instance, examines in part the relation between housework, hysteria, and alienation; Chapter 6 investigates consumerist domesticity, agoraphobia, and anorexia. This investigation of domestic ideology thus delineates both the complexity and the contingency of cultural forms.

Finally, what is made can be made or arranged otherwise, or even disposed of, but disposal of artifacts, we now have urgent reason to know, creates new problems and dangers. The self-protective scope continually adjusted by new individualistic forms, however, might lead us to find new and safer ways of self-definition and disposal. It is in the reformulation and manipulation of domestic boundaries, after all, that the self this book studies both changes and endures.