

Domesticity

Description

Domesticity, by definition, is the life inside of a home. The values that we share, the morals we have are all learned in the home first. At the center of that lifestyle education is the woman in her role as wife and mother. It is the woman's job, outlined in the ideals of womanhood from the 1800s, to take care of the home. This is not limited to the household duties such as cooking and cleaning. It also includes raising her children to be respectable, happy, decent people and providing love and support for her husband. This particular set of primary sources provide examples of this nurturing effect domesticity had on Elizabeth Merriweather and her boys.

The letters in this collection represent the many letters of correspondence between Liz and her boys, Avery, Lee and Rivers. There are also some from her husband, Minor as well as a captain who was apparently teaching one of her sons. The main focus is the dialogue between Liz and her kids.

In a letter dated July 18 1874, one son, Lee, is writing Liz to ask for her forgiveness for something. While we do not know what that something is, it is clear that the act of acting for forgiveness means that he values her opinion. It matters what she thinks of him. Lee puts her on a pedestal as evidenced by him calling her "Fair Goddess."

The second letter is from another son, Avery. In a letter dated April 22, 1976, Avery writes to his mother for her advice on a speech which he named "Demon Drunk". Avery chose his mother over anyone else, meaning her opinion is what means the most to him. He also says that he's "trusting in the kindness of her heart." This suggests that Liz is a kind mother, which is one of the ideals of true womanhood. The ideals of true womanhood, as stated by Catherine Beecher in her *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, that a good woman above all else was a good Christian mother. Elizabeth espoused these ideals by doting on her sons. According to Beecher's treatise, "...in order to secure her the more firmly in all these privileges, it is decided, that, in the domestic relation, she take a subordinate station..." By taking a subordinate station, she becomes the nurturer that her sons need, and she is preparing them to be great citizen of the United States. Avery's letter suggested that she was in fact a good mother because he valued her opinion above others.

A third letter is from Liz to Avery. Although Avery is away at school along with his brother Rivers, Liz is worried about the possibility of another Civil War. She knows that her sons will be called to fight if that happened and she was afraid of them losing their lives like many who had gone before them. She even jokes about going to Canada to avoid it but she knew that they would have to fight for their country if it were to happen. It simply just made her sad to think about losing her babies. She wanted them to do what society expected of them and knew that her opinion was not necessarily an important one, but she wanted him to know that she wished that she could protect him from it.

In the next letter, dated April 4, 1876, Liz wrote Rivers and Avery. Liz expressed her concern of the boys' mental and physical state of being. The boys are away at school so she updates them on the family. She explains that the baby boy, now fifteen years old is ready to leave home for college. She asks them also in the letter how they feel about her working outside of the home and how would they feel about how people looked at them. This showed Liz wanted to work outside of the home but she knew that was jeopardizing her family because they all would be judged by her working outside the home. She also wanted to get the boys opinion and their approval for working outside the home. At this time, middle to upper class women did not work outside the home. This was true across the nation, as evidenced in Deborah Rotman's essay "Separate Spheres: Beyond the Dichotomies of Domesticity." Rotman states, "Child rearing became a significant concern, and the home emerged as a haven from the evils of the outside world." Thus, if Elizabeth left the home to work then she wouldn't be available as keeper of that haven. In effect, she would be letting her family down.

The next letter from Lee addressed to Captain Anderson dated July 31, 1875. This letter from Lee Meriwether is an answer to Captain Anderson. Captain Anderson blamed Lee's failing lessons on his attention to his appearance. Lee went to his mom Liz to get advice and they both decided that he was not struggling due to his appearance but his lack of paying attention to his work. They came to the conclusion that he could continue to paying close attention to his appearance as long as he paid the same amount of attention to his lessons.

The next letter written by Minor addressed to Liz was dated September 6, 1886. Minor wrote Liz while they were apart. Liz is in St. Louis and Minor is in Memphis. He updates Liz on Estelle's health. Minor explains he does not trust the Irish. This shows that Minor was still in charge of the household even when Liz was away visiting family in St. Louis, MO. Even though Liz was very much involved in her sons' lives, she could not get involved in the public sphere of their life like with a lawsuit.

These letters all showed just how much Liz nurtured her children even after they left for college. The role of domesticity is evident in the way that Liz's children leaned and counted on her. Even she leaned on them when asking if they thought it would be okay if she worked outside the home. This just shows how deep a woman and her children bond really was. These sources were a very good example of domesticity and its impact on the lives of all those in the home.

Further Reading

"A Treatise on Domestic Economy, For the Use of Young Ladies at Home, and At School."
Beecher's Domestic Treatise. Accessed April 15, 2015.
<http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/sentimnt/snescebhp.html>.

Rotman, Deborah L. "Separate Spheres?: Beyond the Dichotomies of Domesticity"
Current Anthropology, Vol. 47, No. 4, 2006, 666-674.

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