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Nancy F. Cott. *The Bonds of Womenhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England 1780 1835*.

The purpose of the book, *The Bonds of Womenhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England 1780 1835*, written by Nancy F. Cott was to demonstrate that women from a century ago were breaking out of their traditional sphere of working in the home and shaping new roles for themselves in the community. During the process they also learned how to strengthen “the bonds of womanhood” with other women (Cott, 204). Cott (160) calls this new feeling sisterhood.

New England middle class women were very smart about using the opportunities they had available to ‘push the envelope’ and gain more power as efficiently as possible. The book is organized by chapters that follow the progression of how women of the time moved through the spheres of work, domesticity, education, and religion ending with sisterhood. These are the spheres that women passed through in order to find a new place in the world; a world where they could have power and a world where relationships with other women empowered them to keep moving forward. The thesis of the book is that women used the opportunities they had in society to move from the home sphere out into the world. This is the way women became more involved within their communities and gained freedom from domesticity. The first chapter of the book is titled “Work” and signifies the first “women’s sphere” (Cott, 29). Work was wrapped up tightly with economics and economics was considered a man’s realm (Cott, 21). Cott (20) writes that until women started moving out of their traditional sphere of work and reaching acceptance; a woman was still considered inferior to a

man.

An example can be found in one of the divorce records shared by Cott (20).

In fact, the divorce records of the time are almost frightening viewed from contemporary times. Husbands and wives had clearly delineated roles they were expected to carry out. A husband's role was "to supply or provide" and the wife's role was "to use goods frugally and obey" (Cott, 20).

But women were allowed to actively participate in the church; in fact they were expected to contribute to the religious community. The Protestant churches of New England increased their membership due to women joining; women joined churches two to three times more than men (Cott, 132).

Unfortunately, the ministers of the churches did not look kindly on independent women so the challenges the women evangelical leaders faced were daunting. Ministers and husbands expected women to stay within those boundaries and not cause any trouble (Cott, 158).

A minister named Joseph Richardson, for example, explained, "Subordination to principles and laws of order is absolutely essential to the existence of the social state. Break up the order of the social state and woman must become the most abject and helpless of all slaves" (Cott, 159). Reverend Richardson surely must have given his approval to women who reading the Bible, but women who reached further than the Bible and learned more about the world and different cultures would not have been so easily accepted. For example, Cott explains that women who read the Bible without much interest in other sources of material were still drawn to the story of Mrs. Newell who was a missionary in Burma. Mrs. Newell not only described a new culture to women but also shared feelings they may have never thought possible. This

in turn led women to become involved in spreading the Word of God, which naturally took them out of their domestic life.

Cott (xii) explains in the preface the influence that feminist thought had on her research and writing. In the 1970s the woman's liberation movement was growing; women became conscious of their roles in the world. Women were identifying and redefining their roles in the world. The decade of the 70s was a decade of self-realization for many women; a trend that led to the feminist movement. She explains in the preface how class consciousness and socialist organizing and thinking impacted here point of view (Cott, xiii). The author's perspective on history was informed by Marx.

Cott's book *New* could be thought of as a product of the time (that is the 1970s and the beginning of the feminist movement) because the subject is women and women's spheres in the home and finding ways to create spheres outside the home. On the other hand, she has organized the journals, letters and narratives about women so well that a better assumption is that she helped show other women how to write about women. The women's spheres of that time and place start with working in the home in subservience (or even slavery) and then, as women break the bonds of womanhood, they pass through several spheres to attain a more powerful position in the community and/or world (Cott, 197).

Cott does not specifically use the word historiography but that is the way the book has been researched and written. The way information was communicated at the time is the way we learn the history of the New England middle class women. The writings of women give the reader a view of the internal, private world of females; whereas the use of fiction gives the

reader a view of the external world. She translates the Old English so a contemporary audience can appreciate the past.

Cott's book is a good companion to the textbook because she offers insight into how personally difficult the change in women's roles must have been for individual women. The historiography Cott has written is especially important because she allows one sector of the population, middle class women, to speak for themselves. The emotions of women are clearly understood from the collection of their personal writings; so feelings are understood better in *Women's Spheres* than in the textbook (Cott, 160).

Middle class white women could read because along with American independence came primary education for both boys and girls so they could learn to have a sense of nationalism (Cott, 103). Therefore girls were allowed to attend primary school with the boys. Female teachers and literate women expanded the need for magazines and reading material to suit the female tastes (Cott, 103).

Former slaves were not often privileged enough to learn to read and write but they influenced women finding independence because of the evangelical style of worshipping. Some of the most important women of the day were evangelical ministers and had their own followers. Evangelicalism became popular and was very severe in some ways. For example, Abigail Lyman paraphrased the sentiment that 'if you are not with us, you are against' referring to her religious beliefs (Cott, 141). Women were encouraged to form groups in order to be part of a community "not only in a psychological but in a literal sense, for piety implied group evangelical activity" (Cott, 142). The ministers and husbands approved piety and evangelical activity but they

did not foresee the formation of feelings of sisterhood between women that grew from the groups.

Sisterhood is the word Cott (160) uses to describe the “ newly self-conscious and idealized concept of female friendship” that developed. The organization of religious benevolent associations encouraged the feeling of cooperation, and in that way women were joined in reaching towards common goals together (Cott, 160). An accepted common goal was to remain pious. Their commonalities helped to enhance collaborative associations and bring women more intimately together than earlier in history.

Although there are similarities between the challenges that women in contemporary times face compared to the 1830s, the degree of change that was needed was larger in the past. Therefore the experiences of early New England women and those of today’s women run on parallel paths, not the same path. The sense of sisterhood was first felt when women were able to communicate and reach out to each other. The women in Cott’s book built the foundation for writing history about women. Today’s female teachers, leaders and speakers can look to the past for excellent role models.

Cott weaves her text and the quotations of New England middle class women throughout the chapters of the book in a flowing style that made the book easy to read. History the way Cott presented it is personal and interesting. Anyone interested in the subject of feminism or how women lived a century ago should read this book.

A very interesting fact from Cott’s book was that women saw their duties in the household and in the world as equally important and complimentary.

This is very different from the women who worked in factories during World

War II and their difficulty in fitting back into domestic life, but wanted the same freedoms they had experienced as 'working girls'. Modern couples when planning their wedding vows do not include the traditional line about a wife's need to obey her husband. This is one proof that women have progressed over the century and are no longer subjugated to their husbands.