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This dissertation provides a transatlantic, historical approach to women's reading, analyzing within that context representations of fictional women readers, bearing in mind the cultural anxiety surrounding "the reading habit." These fictional readers contributed to the phenomenon of "the woman reader," and representations of reading women shaped ideas about women's intellectual abilities, public voices, and domestic roles. The following chapters offer a comparative analysis of women readers in select British and American novels to consider their cultural and political implications. Ultimately, I claim that women readers in the American novel read to establish agency in the service of establishing a national identity, while women readers in the British novel read to establish agency within the domestic sphere with the aim of extending their influence into their immediate community. While anxiety surrounding the "woman reader" straddled the Atlantic, over the long nineteenth-century she developed differently on opposite shores.

The following chapters investigate affinities between British and American texts as well as divisions resulting from divergent historical and cultural circumstances. My investigation includes the American novels: *The Coquette*, *Hope Leslie*, *The Wide, Wide World*, and *Work* and British novels: *Belinda*, *Mansfield Park*, *Villette* and *The Doctor's Wife*, to extrapolate how historical circumstances shaped and were shaped by female literary culture of the period. These novels were chosen because they portray readers at pivotal moments in their respective national histories. To approach how authors construct women readers, I ask such questions as: Who is reading? What are they reading? Why

was the novel dangerous? The answers support my argument that political events, women's status, and women's literature are intertwined and impacted by the changing role of the household. When sociopolitical ideologies differ, the elements that "construct" the woman reader change. This is where the value of a transatlantic consideration lies. The trope of "the woman reader" does not do justice to this cultural phenomenon that shaped women, their families, and by extension, their nations.

OCEANS APART: WOMEN READERS IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY
BRITISH AND AMERICAN NOVEL

by

Martha Broadaway Griffin

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For my sons, Will and Jack

APPROVAL PAGE

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Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

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Who is reading? What are they reading? Why does it matter? It matters because what we read impacts who we are, and we, in turn, impact the world around us. The woman reader is not just a nineteenth-century source of anxiety – the woman reader is among us – at the beach, on a plane, in a book club, teaching a class, and authors who write about her have something to say. History has proven that literate women are empowered women, and empowered women are interesting. Writing about them has been my pleasure.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

In their choices of reading material, fictional women readers make diverse statements about ideas of domesticity and nation, terms that were particularly relevant in the nineteenth century when both America and England were debating the “woman question.” Cultural and social debate about women’s property rights, legal rights, marriage, education and work occurred in intellectual circles and in print, and literature that addresses this topic explores the competing ideologies of those who championed a traditional, domestic role and those who supported women’s ventures beyond the home. This dissertation focuses on representations of women readers in nineteenth-century novels, considering affinities between British and American texts as well divisions resulting from divergent historical and cultural circumstances. By investigating novels written by the American authors Hannah Webster Foster (1758–1840), Catharine Maria Sedgwick (1789-1867), Susan Bogert Warner (1819-1885), and Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888), and comparing them to contemporaneous fiction by British writers, Maria Edgeworth (1767–1849), Jane Austen (1775–1817), Charlotte Brontë (1816 –1855) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1837 –1915), I consider how historical circumstances shaped and were shaped by female literary culture of this period.

This study is my attempt to understand past generations of readers and how they continue to construct readers and influence ideas about reading today. The fictional

woman reader is a consistent presence in novels and a figure in constant flux. Consider one of the most successful series of books this century, Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* saga, four books based on the relationship between a mortal high school girl and a century old vampire. In the books, our cerebral heroine, Bella, reads Shakespeare and Austen, whose plots loosely parallel events in her life. In the first book, Bella remarks that *Pride and Prejudice* is her favorite book, while the second book in the series, *New Moon*, is loosely based on *Romeo and Juliet*. The third installment, *Eclipse*, echoes another of Bella's favorite novels, *Wuthering Heights*, which is alluded to so frequently that HarperCollins redesigned the *Wuthering Heights* cover to reference *Twilight* as sales of Emily Brontë's 1847 classic have skyrocketed in Europe and the United States. The *Twilight* series itself has sold over sixty million copies since it appeared in 2005. In the series, Bella is torn between her obsessive love for her vampire boyfriend and her werewolf best friend, and in the absence of a sympathetic ear, like so many of her fictional foremothers, Bella turns to literature to make sense of life. The references to literary classics and their importance to Bella drive home the point that fictional readers have the ability to directly influence the reading public and the collective cultural memory.

But unlike our modern heroine, women who populate nineteenth-century novels struggle with a lack of personal freedom. One form of emotional and sometimes physical escape is reading, sometimes letters, sometimes the Bible, often novels – the locus of the debate about appropriate reading for young women. Within nineteenth-century novels, representations of women readers vary widely. To approach how British and American authors construct women readers, it is important to consider how readers are portrayed

asking such questions as: Who is reading? What are they reading? Why was the novel dangerous? Because women in America and England read in different social and historical circumstances, reducing the impact of the woman reader to a “trope” does not do justice to this cultural phenomenon that shaped women, their families, and ultimately their nations.

In this dissertation, I take a transatlantic, historical approach to women's reading, analyzing within that context representations of fictional women readers, bearing in mind the cultural anxiety surrounding “the reading habit.” These fictional readers contributed to the phenomenon of “the woman reader” ignited by printing technologies, the expansion of the reading public, and better education and career opportunities for women, as representations of reading women shaped ideas about women’s intellectual abilities, public voices, and domestic roles. The following chapters offer a comparative analysis of representations of women readers in British and American texts to consider the cultural and political implications of women readers in the nineteenth-century novel.

What kind of young women are the authors in this dissertation suggesting we raise? Ultimately, I claim that women readers in the American novel read in pursuit of their “natural rights,” while women readers in the British novel read to strengthen their domestic influence to make inroads into or out of their immediate community. While anxiety surrounding the “woman reader” straddled the Atlantic, over the long nineteenth-century her impact developed differently on opposite shores.

Critics have examined the topic of women readers for years. In his 1957 study, *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt emphasizes how publishers, in their effort to reach a

wider audience, encouraged writers to portray a wider array of classes and peoples, some specifically aimed at women (13). Taking a different approach, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar concentrate on women writers, arguing that unlike male writers, women authors had to both challenge and conform to patriarchal standards. But like many of their contemporaries who consider women readers and writers, Watt, Gilbert and Gubar underemphasize historical conditions, and as Nancy Armstrong, compiling her evidence from conduct books and eighteenth and nineteenth-century English novels points out in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, “so long as we assume that gender transcends history, we have no hope of understanding what role women played in shaping the world we presently inhabit” (8).

More recently, Catherine J. Golden’s 2003 book, *Images of the Woman Reader in Victorian British and American Fiction*, examines competing visions of the woman reader in order to “spark further scrutiny of the complexities of our own reading habits as well as those of the Victorians” (14). Like Kate Flint in her 1993 study, *The Woman Reader, 1837– 1914*, Golden argues that the woman reader is a “recurrent and multifaceted theme in fiction,” and considers the shifting image of the woman reader as well as her cultural significance (4). Building on Flint's approach, Golden begins to provide a transatlantic context for the cultural phenomena of the woman reader, but focuses heavily on illustrations and on the metaphorical extensions of women “reading.”

This dissertation contributes to the conversation by exploring lines of thought that involve representations of fictional women readers. Through the lens of reading, I look at shifting concepts of domesticity, work, and gender roles to consider how reading recasts

ideas of nation. But what is meant by “domesticity,” and how do we define “nationalism” in the nineteenth century novel? Both are slippery terms that had different meanings at different times. During the nineteenth century, nationalism was a particularly contested term as England was struggling to protect its borders and maintain social stability, while America was a young nation in the process of defining itself – a struggle that is played out in its evolving national literature. In *Cultural Theory: the Key Concepts*, Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick argue that:

Nationalism presents itself not simply as a political phenomenon, but also as a matter of cultural identity. As such, any conception of the nation to which it refers must take account of ethnic, historic and linguistic criteria, as well as political notions such as legitimacy, bureaucracy and presence of definable borders. Nationalists make a number of specific claims for the nation, which vary in significance according to the particular historical situation. A primary argument is that the nation has a right to autonomy, and that the people of the nation must be free to conduct their own affairs. As a corollary to this autonomy, nationalist presuppose that the members of the nation share a common identity, which may be defined according to the political or cultural criteria. This notion of identity may be extended to create a sense of unity of purpose, whereby the projects of individuals are subsumed within the projects of nation. (220)

In the aftermath of the American and French Revolutions, nationalisms increasingly became the conceptual framework for thinking about culture and society. However, because “nation” is itself a politically and culturally disputed term, it makes sense that a definition of nationalism is difficult to establish, and even today, issues such as globalization and mass communication force citizens to contemplate what it means to be “American” or “English.” Harkening back to Benedict Anderson, Patrick Parrinder in his 2006 book, *Nation and Novel: The English Novel from Its Origins to the Present Day*, reminds us that “the communities in fiction are, necessarily, imagined communities;

but if a novel is a representation of an imagined community then so, as many recent writers have argued, are our ideas of nationhood” (14). Nation is a theoretical construction, and while patriotism implies an attachment to a physical entity, as Parrinder notes, nationalism is loyalty to an idea (14).

Loyalty to an idea of nation plays out in English literature through a variety of plot conventions. In nineteenth-century women authored novels, it is handled through the marriage plot. After the overthrow of the French nobility, the English aristocracy was determined to retain power. At this time, however, a middle-class pattern of marriage was becoming dominant, and novels propagated this ideal as authors such as Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth expressed anxieties about marriage (and in turn, gender roles and nation) in their writing. Parrinder argues that the “English courtship novel reflects the tension between the traditional definition of womanhood in terms of the marriage market, and women’s demand for moral independence and self-respect. That marriage is a kind of market is rarely forgotten in these novels” (184). Courtship novels were not simply romantic visions of social mobility - their allegory lies in the marriage plot, in which social alliances reflect the reconciliation of national differences. For example, *Pride and Prejudice* has political implications in its union between the Tory gentry and the Whig aristocrat. Alternately, in *Villette*, Brontë’s heroine is a spiritual exile from England and needs no homeland or alliances. England has failed her, and her Protestantism and the references to *The Pilgrim’s Progress* in her story are the last vestiges of her Englishness. The price for her independence is a life without love or country. Scores of fictional heroines are married in the final chapters of the English novel, but through those who are

not, and often through those who are, authors comment on the political and social ideologies that define women's roles and the state of the "nation" in general.

While the English were dealing with aristocratic instability and threats to national unity, Americans intellectuals believed that national survival depended upon the creation of a national culture through the cultivation of an American language, literature, and education. To further complicate this process, in America, nationalism was gendered. The Revolution sent mixed messages to women by asking them to contribute to the war effort as public agents of virtue, while at the same time pigeonholing them into domestic roles. In her fiction, Hannah Webster Foster posed the question, "Would the new republic be a place of female as well as male liberty?" *The Coquette* probes the social world of early America, its gendered implications, and the ways this world was constructed in print. Thirty years later, Catharine Sedgwick combined nationalism with protests against Puritan oppression in *Hope Leslie*, as the novel recounts a conflict between the British Empire, the American colonists, and Native Americans. To challenge the role of women during the hostile colonial period, Hope creates a public role for herself that is not separate from the private sphere. Moving to the 1850's, a time that churned with the Protestant revival as well as with secular reform movements including Paulina Kellogg Wright Davis's national woman's rights convention, the passage of the "compromise" bill that included new fugitive slave laws, and debate over Manifest Destiny, women such as Margaret Fuller and the Grimké sisters spoke to forward progressive causes. While Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, seems at odds with the woman's rights movement, Nina Baym and Jane Tompkins argue that in it, the home encompasses the human soul which

is the only reform that counted. Finally, Alcott, who was educated by the likes of Thoreau and Fuller, writes from the standpoint of an abolitionist and feminist, and in *Work* represents Civil War era America as a place where women must forge opportunities for themselves to strengthen the social and political health of the damaged nation.

Nineteenth-century American novels reflect the condition of women in the developing nation, the future of which will require the involvement of its women in both public and private roles.

But what is meant by “private role?” In the nineteenth-century, this role is associated with the Victorian concept of “separate spheres,” and tied into the larger concept of “domesticity.” A new ideal of womanhood and a new ideology about the home which required young women to cultivate four primary characteristics: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness, arose out of new attitudes about work and family. While domesticity as a category of feminist research has helped reconstruct a vision of American women’s lives, June Howard, in, her 2001 book, *Publishing the Family*, which considers American literary sentimentalism and changing expectations about gendered identity, argues that too many critics rely on a dated concept of separate spheres, and believes that “the correlation of the binaries masculine/feminine and public/private is precisely what we need to explain,” (231). Howard notes that the shift has begun, citing among others Cathy Davidson’s 2002 book, *No More Separate Spheres!: A Next Wave American Studies Reader*, but believes that more scholarship examining how subjective and social life are revised in the modern configuration is needed. Domesticity cannot work as a static concept because it was a shifting and

contested term, and authors use the domestic ideal to mean different things. It complexity becomes obvious when we consider how women authors themselves struggled with the idea, often presenting progressive views of domesticity in their fiction, but experiencing anxiety about their own public roles.

Howard attributes to Nancy Armstrong one of the most radical arguments for the formative role of gendered identity in modernity and fiction's role in creating that identity. In *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Armstrong writes, "a modern, gendered form of subjectivity developed first as a feminine discourse in certain literature for women... The gendering of human identity provided the metaphysical girders of modern culture" (14). For Armstrong, the modern order depends on the socializing practices of home and the spheres of domestic woman and economic man. Nineteenth-century England is marked by events such as the rise of the middle class, industrial capitalism, nationalism, and the rhetoric of separate spheres, all of which had consequences for the new ways in which women were idealized as the concept of separate spheres came to influence their experiences at home and at work. During the reign of Queen Victoria, a woman's place was in the home, and domesticity and motherhood were constructs that kept women away from the public sphere. However, as charitable and reform efforts expanded women's role, and many single (and married) women were forced to support themselves financially, Victorian feminism began to emerge as a political force, necessitating a reconsideration of women's domestic role as keeper of hearth and home.

In contrast to domesticity in England, historians of the United States cite the origins of domesticity as the time when production shifted away from the household. In

America, the rise of the middle class, domestic ideology, and the remapping of a world formerly organized by kinship are connected. Two foundational studies, Mary Ryan's community study, *Cradle of the Middle Class* (1981) which argues that between 1790 and 1865, "the American middle class molded its distinctive identity around domestic values and family practices," and Stuart Blumin's study of American urban experience, *The Emergence of the Middle Class* (1989), which presents domesticity as central to the self-definition of the middle class, both note that print culture, including magazines, advice books, newspapers, and fiction played a role in promoting the domestic ideal. Howard observes, "domesticity appears not just as a middle-class value but as constitutive of the middle class. . . . That does not mean that members of other groups did not love their families and value their homes. The historical actors emerging as the middle class, however, incorporate such sentiments as part of their sense of self-worth and social belonging" (236). If domesticity plays a key role in the construction of the middle class, then it stands to reason that it also plays a key role in imagining the nation as home, making women major players in defining the parameters of "nation," Amy Kaplan, in her essay, "Manifest Domesticity," explains that domesticity "dominated middle-class women's writing and culture from the 1830's through the 1850's, a time when national boundaries were in violent flux; during this period the United States doubled its national territory, completed a campaign of Indian removal, fought its first prolonged foreign war, wrested the Spanish borderlands from Mexico, and annexed Texas, Oregon and California" (186). She goes on to argue that feminist critics whose work explores the paradigm of separate spheres have tended to overlook the correlation

between domesticity and nationalism. In this dissertation, I attempt to respond to this relationship.

By mining the social and cultural circumstances behind the phenomena of the woman reader, I consider how national histories were shaped by the construction of the domestic and womanly ideal. Many nineteenth-century proponents claimed that women should read for educational purposes to benefit the family, for social purposes, and for individual enrichment. Competing arguments claimed that women's weak constitutions exposed them to the pernicious effects of reading. Catherine Golden writes, "The polar ideologies that fueled the reading debate form a collage of women readers. Dire images of girls consuming novels in secret and dying with diseased minds appear alongside inspiring pictures of women reading independently, in clubs, or in the family parlor" (42). Bearing in mind nebulous concepts such as domesticity and nationalism, I consider what cultural circumstances prompted such angst, and how historical circumstances influenced the construction of women readers.

The Evolution of the Publishing Industry and the Reading Public

Richard Altick writes in *The English Common Reader* that the nineteenth century saw remarkable changes in the reading public: "Never before in English history had so many people read so much" (2). In 1840, 50 percent of England's population could read, but by 1900, the rate rose to over 95 percent (Mitch xvi). This new, literate population demanded reading materials, and the publishing market responded with an influx of novels. As production rose, prices dropped and literature became affordable for the

working class. In 1870, Anthony Trollope wrote, “We have become a novel-reading public. Novels are in the hands of us all; from the Prime Minister down to the last appointed scullery maid” (108). Altick attributes this increase in reading to religion, politics, education, and technology. To consider the transatlantic woman reader’s role in this sea change, it is critical to consider how such factors developed differently in America and England, pointing to pivotal events as well as issues of education, the rise of the middle class, social reform, and of course, the availability of literature itself.

At the turn of the eighteenth century, England was centuries ahead of America in matters of print. American novels lagged England in numbers, distribution, readership, and remained crippled by the Puritanical distrust of imaginative literature. In America, printing presses were imported, and paper was expensive because it was imported and taxed. Books were not distributed easily between colonies, and as Trish Loughran points out, “colonial booksellers had long accepted two facts of American life...first, the colonies’ economic dependence on the British book trade, and second, the dispersion of colonial populations – would-be book buyers” (43). The American book trade was so splintered that James Gilreath insists there were “thirteen separate book cultures in the colonies” and points out that the American distribution system “consisted of informal networks of friends, temporary laborers, independent agents, peddlars, and bookstore owners whose income came only partially from books” (Loughram 43). These factors rendered books in America almost prohibitively expensive.

While some American presses had lucrative government contracts, printers did not have the capacity to print novels. But after the American Revolution, printing costs

fell with the rise of northeastern paper mills. In 1790, a book printed in the United States in two volumes cost approximately one dollar, the equivalent to one day's wages for a skilled laborer. By 1860, novels cost about ten cents. In the 1840s, printing in America moved from small, local presses to larger cities with greater distribution to the interior, and the 1840's ushered in the large national publishing houses. American nationality was altered by the centralization of production and the burgeoning interior as a market for northeastern goods as improved travel routes ramped up trade between regions. Summing up the importance of these developments to the national character, Loughram claims that "national discourse did not emerge via print until different areas of the country were in just this sort of sustained contact" (23).

American literature was not on its own physically until trade routes were established, and was not on its own philosophically until the arrival of the transcendentalists in the 1830's. In contrast, Britain had enjoyed a novelistic tradition since the eighteenth century, and based on paper production statistics, enjoyed healthy literary production as well. Sales reflect that from 1800-1825, paper production was consistent, occasionally rising in response to political or social issues. The early 1830's continued this trend upward, with a spike in 1832 associated with the Great Reform Bill. The rate of publication steepened after 1845. Simon Eliot points out some reasons for this increase, including "the economic and political disturbances of the mid-1840's ...the debates over the Oxford Movement, the Great Exhibition (and the associated debate over the Crystal Palace), and the death of Wellington" (Jordan 28).

The British reading public had access to all kinds of literature, and women made up the majority of the novel reading public. Kate Flint writes, “The awareness of Victorians and Edwardians of that discrete category, ‘the woman reader’, and the hypotheses about her special characteristics, as well as her presumed needs and interests, affected the composition, distribution, and marketing of literature” (13). One response to her “presumed interests” was the practice of serialization, and Hughes and Lund note that “women’s entry into the literary market as mass readers and popular writers and the emergence of serial fiction as a dominant publication mode in the nineteenth century can be seen as a related phenomena” (145). In fact, the association between novels and female authorship was so prevalent that Gaye Tuchman and Nina Fortin discovered in the Macmillan publishing archives that “in the 1860’s and 1870’s men submitting fiction were more likely to assume a female name than women were to use either a male or neuter name” (5). Literary critics note the connection that serial publication created between audience and text and author, and how authors responded to that intimacy. For example, David Skilton, in his introduction to *Lady Audley’s Secret*, quotes Mary Elizabeth Braddon who changed the ending of *The Doctor’s Wife* because she found herself “so apt to be influenced by little scraps of newspaper criticism, and by what people say about me” (Hughes and Lund 145).

It was fear of such intimacy that raised concern among commentators who addressed the question of what and how women should read. But not all commentators vilified all novels. The English physician, Erasmus Darwin, in his 1798 *Plan for the Conduct of Female Education at Boarding Schools* classifies novels as serious,

humorous, or amorous. And while Darwin forbids reading amorous novels, he endorses serious novels, specifically those written by Burney, Brooks, Lennox, Inchbald, and Smith. Darwin asks, “How can young women, who are secluded from the other sex from their infancy, form any judgment of men, if they are not to be assisted by such books as delineate manners?” (qtd. in Armstrong 8). Darwin believed that fiction could occupy leisure time, while at the same time providing educational value.

But Darwin was an exception. More often, literary critics and commentators focused on the negative effects of women reading novels, “thieves of time” that distracted from domestic duties, offered a more exciting life, and inscribed dangerous morals on keepers of the hearth and nation. Concern for women’s weaker constitutions and feeble minds is evident in the 1859 *National Review* article, “False Morality of Lady Novelists” in which the critic W.R. Greg posits that “novels constitute a principal part of the reading of women, who are always impressionable, in whom at all times the emotional element is more awake and more powerful than the critical, whose feelings are more easily aroused and whose estimates are more easily influenced than ours” (86). Such sentiments were echoed in a profusion of female conduct books published in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Conduct books, as a rule, offered only one kind of “safe” fiction for young women, “a non-aristocratic kind of writing that was both polite and particularly suitable for a female readership” (Armstrong 97). Burney’s *Evelina* is the best known example of fiction by lady novelists, authors of “polite novels” which came to define the novel genre. The goal of conduct books in relation to fiction was to distinguish between good reading and bad, insisting that the formation of taste required some knowledge of

the classics. A conduct book might require that women study Milton and Shakespeare, or like the 1837 *Young Lady's Friend*, recommend an entire tradition including “Young, Goldsmith, Thomson, Gray, Parnell, Cowper, Campbell, Burns, Wordsworth, Southey; also the ethical parts of Pope’s poetry” (427).

While the debate about the effects of novel reading raged, so did the novel’s popularity. Both British and American novels incorporated references to reading in an effort to question ideas about the relationship between women’s reading practices and their responses to text. Arguments against the assumption that women unthinkingly identified with women characters were addressed in the novels themselves. References to reading appear within novels in a variety of ways. The most obvious is the quotation, enabling authors to establish a commonality between themselves and their readers. Other references to specific texts enhance the aesthetic value of a novel, calling upon a reader’s prior knowledge. Another use of references is to heighten the realism of fiction, while a fourth method comments on the type of text in which it appears, specifically romantic fiction. Flint notes that ultimately, “allusions to ‘high’ culture increased the literary status of a romantic tale, enabling the reader to justify (to herself as much as to others) spending time on escapist literature” (256). In an era of limited education and opportunities, reading enabled women to expand their horizons beyond the home, but in spite of its positive effects reading remained predominately associated with inappropriate ambition.

The Rise and Motivations of the Middle Class

Who were these readers with time for “escapist literature”? On both sides of the Atlantic, this reader is associated with the middle class. In the latter part of the eighteenth century, anxiety about women’s roles escalated to the point that conduct books, political debate, cartoons and novels focused on threats to the family. In England, the French Revolution’s claim that structures such as religion and government should be reinvented raised fears surrounding reform and revolution. Linda Colley argues that “the participation of women in the Revolution, combined with the threat of a French invasion and the execution of Marie Antoinette and the French Royal family, increased anxiety about the boundaries of women’s sphere” (qtd. Herrera 15). Such anxiety supports my argument that we cannot investigate the phenomenon of the woman reader without understanding the politics, history, and literature that shaped her world.

This collision of the private and public spheres is mediated by the ideology of the middle class family. The pre-industrial household in England and colonial America was largely dependent upon goods produced within the home. As a result, public and private spheres were not separate. But towards the end of the eighteenth century and into the early nineteenth century, changes in the nature of the household occurred, fueled by capitalism, technology, and improvements in production and transportation. Both England and America entered an expanding world market, resulting in shifts between classes and genders, and personal merit trumping inheritance as a barometer of success.

The middle-class family gradually became a private unit with women at its center, essentially excluding them from the public realm. As a result, the nineteenth century

developed more scrupulous codes of female deportment, and “the cult of ideology of true womanhood not only promoted female chastity and envisioned marriage, and consequently, motherhood as the fulfillment of a woman’s destiny, but it confirmed a gendered division of labor” (Herrera 2). This nuclear norm advanced in both England and America was white, heterosexual, patriarchal, and middle to upper class. But in reality, variations of this ideal abounded that were not based on kinship, class or gender.

Such variations are due in part to the fact that by the end of the eighteenth century, romantic practices began to change. Unions between members of different classes, often founded on love, occurred more frequently. Ian Robertson observes that the concept of love-based marriage was a “cultural trait found primarily in industrialized, capitalistic societies” (95). Shifting ideas about marriage and family found their way into the literature of the period. In the nineteenth century, as society became more democratic, novels increasingly rejected the “marriage solution” and addressed socially relevant themes such as divorce, spinsterhood, or communities of independent women.

In America, the nature of the young republic led women to insist on change. Disparities between the inherited English legal system and conditions in America necessitated reform. Americans understood the legal relationship between husband and wife as one that divided responsibilities between the spouses. However, marriage remained tied to British common law as defined by Blackstone in the eighteenth century, derived from the Norman feudal practices of *baron en feme*, placing the woman, her children, and her assets under the husband’s power. A wife in civil law was as good as dead. She could not control property, prepare a will, or trade. Despite the laws of

coverture, some disadvantages could be relieved through legal devices such as trusts and prenuptial agreements. But in America, such devices conflicted with the changing economic landscape. Because the exchange of property was common, it was necessary to adjust the laws so women could transact business. So, as Barbara Bardes points out, “English forms and practices, many of which restrained married women, were eroded by the exigencies of American life” (71).

Society was changing, and the modern political state (in both England and America) was formed by this shifting culture, with fiction performing double duty as history’s document and agent. Novels helped define what constituted a “household,” and in turn, what constituted normal behavior. Nineteenth-century British and American societies were riddled by changing ideas about government, the marketplace, and the home. In light of these unstable moorings, Armstrong argues that “if a single cultural reflex could isolate the moment when the new class system that distinguished landowner from capitalist and these from the laboring classes was securely entrenched, it was the insistence that a form of authority whose wellsprings were the passions of the human heart ultimately authorized writing” (14).

But authority based on passion carried with it the fear of the unknown. Moral reformers yoked fiction to sins such as gluttony, greed, and idleness. Not all fiction, however, was deemed inappropriate. Maria Sanchez notes how the morality of certain works made them acceptable for young readers, encouraging them “to hearken to parents and affectionate advisers, remaining under their loving care (*Charlotte Temple, Clarissa*); to beware of rakes... (*The Coquette, Clarissa*); to avoid ‘intoxicating’ influences like

novels or alcohol (*Mary Barton*); and at all costs, to fight for one's virtue (*Pamela*)" (123). When reform rhetoric changed course from politics to morality, the novel became social and cultural agent in its attempt to update social institutions, and reformers harnessed its influence. In America, antebellum literature was changing in function, and David Hall points out that at this moment, "fiction steadily gained on religious and devotional literature as a percentage of total book production. The transition to an age of fiction was complete by the 1850's" (75).

Sanchez argues that "reforming society required reforming fiction," as activism provided women with the opportunity to test the boundaries of domesticity (4). Some of the earliest reform novels by women dealt with fallen women. The best sellers, *Charlotte Temple* (1794) and *The Coquette* (1797), were cautionary tales that warned of rakes and the dangers of insufficient supervision, but in nineteenth-century American literature, abolition, temperance, and women's rights were the predominant topics. Abolitionism was closely related to women's rights, and provided the feminist movement with trained activists along with an ideology that all human beings are fundamentally equal. This attention to women's identity was rooted in social and economic changes. As middle-class women enjoyed more leisure and education, they became a burgeoning audience for fiction with time to participate in social improvements. However, women's work opportunities had narrowed since the Revolution, and women attempting to earn a living or to express themselves remained restricted by custom and law.

The Novel as Political Chronicle

Novels of the period are valuable tools for investigating the struggle for woman's rights because during the Victorian era, the home, idealized as white, patriarchal, and middle-class, became the site of social and political stability in both England and America. But despite its sentimentalized image in domestic fiction, the family was transforming in part from capitalism, but also from women's changing roles. Susan Allen Ford and Charlene Bunnell contend that "from the late eighteenth through the nineteenth century in Britain the very notion that the family and state were analogous bodies raised the issue of their constitution and suggested the centrality of women to both the body and the family politic" (qtd. Herrera 4). Such centrality politicized the private and the domestic sphere.

The novel was the genre of choice for the professional and middle classes, making it responsive to contemporary issues, and as Marilyn Butler points out, "its contemporary setting more or less forced it into sensitive areas" ("Jane Austen" 120). The novels in this dissertation respond to and make statements about women's roles and nationalism, supporting Barbara Bards' argument that "Fiction impinges on history, just as history impinges on fiction" (4). In nineteenth-century America, novels were agents of culture transmission to the extent that *The Literary World* stated in 1850, "The novel is now almost recognized with the newspaper and pamphlet as a legitimate mode of influencing public opinion" (qtd. in Baym 214). While some novels defended contemporary ideas about womanhood, others played a subversive role. In America, when early feminists cited the Declaration of Independence, they expressed a desire to more fully participate

within their culture by exposing its contradictions. Could a society created on a system of individual liberty deny that right to half of its members? This divide between ideology and culture was the basis of many nineteenth-century novels.

Literature plays a critical role in political history, but literature authored by women is often divorced from this equation. Nancy Armstrong explains how this oversight directly affects women, arguing: “If writing is not figured into political history, then political power will continue to appear as if it resides exclusively in institutions that are largely governed by men, and the role played by women at various stages in the middle-class hegemony will remain unexamined for the political force that it was and still is today” (256). I argue that women’s writings, specifically novels, are vital chronicles of political history, especially as that history pertains to women, and I have thus chosen to focus on novels written by women.

Novels authored by women focus on the woman reader, and Flint argues that the “Victorians and Edwardians awareness of her presence and the hypotheses about her special characteristics, as well as her presumed needs and interests, affected the composition, distribution, and marketing of literature” (13). Women readers had economic power, but more importantly, reading gave women an awareness of what Flint terms “the sensations of difference and of similarity,” and the choices she made while reading such as “where to differ, where to acknowledge a bond” were political choices (30). But could readers make good choices? In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft criticizes sentimental fiction for teaching women to privilege sensations over reason. She suggests that the way to correct a fondness for

novels “is to ridicule them” (305). Charlotte Lennox anticipated this call in *The Female Quixote* (1752) which satirizes the influence of the romantic tradition, just as Austen targets the Radcliffean Gothic in *Northanger Abbey*. But Flint argues that the novel’s real danger is its power to make readers reconsider their positions within society. Nineteenth-century women writers “invited their readers to join in a process which involved the active construction of meaning, rather than its revelation” (Flint 278).

Like her readers, the woman writer was herself a construction, albeit one of historical circumstances and market conditions. Catherine Gallagher's 1994 study, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820*, explores the financial challenges women novelists faced during a period crucial to the novel’s establishment as a literary form and to the professionalization of the author. In an earlier text, *A Literature of their Own* (1977), Elaine Showalter claims that the woman writer began to think of herself as a professional in the 1840’s. Gallagher and Showalter agree that the woman writer as a “construct” developed in the contexts of publication history, patronage, and publicity, forwarding the conclusion that politics, history, and literature are indeed intertwined.

But when national histories and political ideologies differ, the elements that “construct” the woman writer (as well as her readers) change. This is where the value of a transatlantic consideration lies. Like many of their English counterparts, many nineteenth-century American authors were middle-class women who needed money. In the period between the War of 1812 and the Civil War, with virtually no middle-class occupations available to them, numerous American women, almost all of them Protestant

from middle-and upper-middle-class backgrounds, published huge quantities of writings, advocating positions on social, religious, and political topics. Women writers were so prolific that Hawthorne lamented, “America is now wholly given over to a d — d mob of scribbling women” to his publisher after Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (1854) sold 70,000 copies its first year (Kennedy-Andrews 15). Women writers had a profession and an audience, and Nina Baym argues, “Antebellum women in general had no reason to suffer from the ‘anxiety of authorship’ whose morbid effects on English writers during this same period Gilbert and Gubar have chronicled” (x).

In America around 1820, teaching and authorship became viable professions for women, and women writers were advocates of women’s education. Accordingly, many fictional heroines during this period were avid readers, hungry for self-improvement. Women authors believed that education was the key to freedom, as women who learned to think critically about their social and political position could learn to control it. This message appears in their novels, geared toward a readership that they encouraged to go beyond fiction. For example, the epigraphs to Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* invoke Shakespeare, Samuel Butler, Robert Burns, Byron, Chapman, Chaucer, Cowper, Dryden, Longfellow, Milton, and Spenser. Through such intertextual references, writers aligned novels with literature and introduced literary taste, expressing faith in the ability of women readers to understand and appreciate good literature.

The most popular novels of the early national period were *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), *Charlotte Temple* (1794), and *The Coquette* (1797), all of which were seduction novels. With woman’s improved self-image, this genre gave way to what Baym terms

“woman’s fiction” – fiction written by women that tells the story of a heroine, who, beset by trials, finds within herself the qualities necessary to overcome them. The genre’s historical antecedents were the novel of manners, developed by Fanny Burney, and the fiction of the English moralists –especially Maria Edgeworth. Women’s fiction was rooted in these sources, but developed indigenously in America and is filled with commentary on republican nationalism. Women writers in both America and England envisioned themselves as guardians or critics of national ideals, and encouraged women readers to use their intellect and influence to rise to the opportunity that history was giving them.

I agree with Baym that “writing produced in a culture with ideas about literature is thoroughly permeated by these ideas” (xv). To consider the relationship between reading, domesticity, and women’s political role in the nineteenth-century, I juxtapose representations of fictional women readers to examine how authors represent cultural and gender ideals. Chapter One considers Hannah Webster Foster’s American novel, *The Coquette*, and Maria Edgeworth’s British novel of manners, *Belinda*. Foster was a spokeswoman for changing social values, and in both *The Coquette*, and her second and final novel, *The Boarding School*, she advocates for better female education, and castigates the double sexual standard. Likewise, in Edgeworth’s nine novels, several essays, and numerous children’s stories, the importance of education and conduct are popular themes, and her first novel, *Belinda*, highlights these values. While the American text highlights the dangers of un-American class-based luxury, *Belinda* does not attack the class system, but calls for responsible management from within it. *The Coquette* calls

for order in post-Revolutionary America, while in *Belinda*, Edgeworth calls upon upper and middle-class women to reform society and offers a model of how to reconstruct Britain after the conflicts of the 1790s and in the face of threats to national unity. The solution to resolving national conflicts in both texts resides in the home.

Chapter Two argues that in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, written for Regency period readers toward the end of the struggle with France, social and political responsibilities must be guided by thinkers to stabilize the nation, while in the American text, *Hope Leslie*, Catharine Sedgwick revises the purpose of reading to create critical thinkers who will take action to create a more tolerant, inclusive nation. *Mansfield Park*, Austen's fourth novel, marks a change of direction for its author. It is dark, morally didactic, and Fanny Price is Austen's most introverted heroine. However, *Mansfield Park* does feature themes found in other Austen novels, such as responsibility, self-knowledge and the importance of education. Like *Mansfield Park*, *Hope Leslie* is also an exception among its author's works, and most criticism links its progressive politics to the racial story it tells. There are women readers in all of Sedgwick's works, however, their reading usually supports a more conservative view of whatever issue is at hand. Sedgwick practiced "centrist" politics: while she believed that women deserved to be paid fairly for their work, and lamented how society treated single women, she did not support radical expansion of "woman's sphere" and was anti-suffrage. These departures are what make Fanny Price and Hope Leslie particularly interesting. From the foundation of her home, Fanny Price will use good sense to guide her immediate community, while Hope Leslie is a public presence whose actions call for the political engagement of women and social

justice. Both texts tackle national issues such as the moral entitlement to land ownership and slavery, and in both texts, patriarchal aristocracy is failing.

In Chapter Three, Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* and Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* reveal contradictions within the womanly ideal as reading fosters domesticity and self-denial, yet enables women to establish agency. However, these novels reveal that "domesticity" itself is a complex idea. Warner herself felt pushed into writing by her father's bankruptcy, and both she and her sister, Anna, whose novel *Dollars and Cents* dramatizes their conflicted feelings about being both "private" and "public," repeatedly made it clear that women's entry into the public sphere should be done discreetly and only under demanding circumstances. Charlotte Brontë also struggled with the limitations of domesticity, and in *Villette* offers a psychological portrait of a woman tormented by isolation and longing. *Villette* is a difficult novel. Its narrator and heroine, Lucy Snowe, is not accessible, and her unreliability makes the novel different from *Jane Eyre*. The manner in which their protagonists respond to the dominant ideology is what makes Warner's text uniquely American and Brontë's distinctively English. *The Wide, Wide World* is concerned with finding ideal womanhood through reading guided by responsible role models, while *Villette* is a rebuke against the narrowness of the domestic ideal and the solitary woman's experience. Both of these novels make strong statements about women's roles as they relate to domesticity and nationalism.

In Chapter Four, I examine Louisa May Alcott's novel, *Work: A Story of Experience* and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife*, both of which consider domesticity and reform through the lens of reading. In these novels, Braddon and Alcott

interrogate the conflict between assuming an idealized role and experiencing possibilities made available by war, widowhood, and wealth. While primarily known for her children's literature, Alcott actually created many strong female characters, and her advocacy of women's careers and her progressive stance on education is evident in her children's books, sensation fiction, and novels. *The Doctor's Wife*, Braddon's first attempt at a novel of character, is a drastic departure for Braddon, who was famous for her sensation fiction, and whose scandalous personal life rendered her especially vulnerable to attack. In *Work*, Louisa May Alcott explores issues of self-indulgence and the pleasures of reading within a framework of sacrifice during the Civil War years. Likewise, *The Doctor's Wife* uses reading to chart its heroine's moral evolution, but ends with a compromise between aristocratic and middle class values. Both texts highlight issues of gender, class, religion and reform, but Alcott's text imagines possibilities beyond what Braddon's Isabel could have dreamed possible in 1860's Midlandshire. *Work* ends with Christie Devon as the force behind a community of women, while Isabel is left "a good and noble woman" who enacts reforms on her own estate (403). Isabel's local actions mirror Christie's ambitious political aims as both women use their new knowledge, faith, and resources to improve their community.

While the source of women's power was ideologically and physically relegated to the domestic sphere, women who learned to read critically developed the agency and knowledge to exercise power outside of the home. Fictional women readers set an example about appropriate reading and responsible actions that empowered novel readers to reach beyond the home and improve their own lives, their communities, and their

nation. In America, women had a larger, newer stage to operate on, while British women exercised influence from the domestic sphere. However, on both sides of the Atlantic, thinking and acting locally (and responsibly) was the key to having a meaningful social and political impact.

CHAPTER II

THE REFORMATIVE POWERS OF READING IN MARIA EDGEWORTH'S *BELINDA* AND HANNAH WEBSTER FOSTER'S *THE COQUETTE*

In this chapter, I explore two very different representations of women readers in Maria Edgeworth's novel of manners, *Belinda* (1801) and Hannah Webster Foster's seduction novel, *The Coquette* (1797). If we consider to question: "What kind of girls should we raise?" in relation to these two novels, the impulse is to focus on education and domestic reading, but the outcome differs, raising questions about how women could prosper in and contribute to their respective society. While Belinda Portman maintains her integrity and reforms her community, Eliza Wharton succumbs to seduction and dies. Both novels offer ideas about the reformative powers of domestic reading, and how such reading (and the sociopolitical ideology it embraced) offered women a modicum of political agency by empowering them as moral, stabilizing agents for the family, the community, and by extension, the state. Edgeworth frames her British text through class relations, while Foster's American text is structured around the quest for personal freedom versus playing an idealized role in the dominant culture. While Belinda is able to strengthen her society through reason and morals gained through right reading practices, the witty, educated Eliza is crushed by a Federalist society which rejects women who resist their prescribed role. Through the lens of reading, and their heroines'

triumphs and failures, these novels consider the implications of undereducating women, denying them agency, and limiting their social choices.

In *Belinda*, Edgeworth does not attack the British class system, but calls for responsible management from within it. The novel begins with Belinda Portman's arrival at Lady Delacour's house, where Belinda's "taste for literature declined in proportion to her intercourse with the fashionable world" (10). Thankfully, through reflection and observation, Belinda realizes that by developing her mind and becoming a woman of principle, she can heal the Delacour's corrupted household and, metaphorically, correct what ails Britain. Belinda sees the shallowness of fashionable life, and removes herself from the marriage market, but unlike *The Coquette's* Eliza Wharton who shuns marriage for the "freedom" to engage in social pleasure, Belinda retreats to the library. In *Belinda*, Edgeworth attacks both fashionable literature and the literature of sensibility. She constructs a heroine who is rational and independent, as well as domestic. Edgeworth's post-Revolutionary social criticism calls on upper and middle-class women to reform society and stabilize the nation by acting as moral agents within the domestic sphere. The novel offers a model of how to reconstruct Britain after the tumultuous 1790s, in response to threats to national unity.

Unlike Edgeworth, in *The Coquette* Foster highlights the threats of un-American class-based ideals to the new nation's republican ideology, while at the same time critiquing that ideology's cost to women. *The Coquette*, a sentimental novel, calls for order in post-revolutionary America, and warns of the disorder that unregulated freedom brings. The novel's heroine, the witty Eliza Wharton, falls prey to her own "wrong idea

about freedom,” and her lack of self-knowledge exposes her to dangers that result in her disgrace and ultimately, her death. Eliza’s downward moral spiral follows her intellectual demise, and the farther she falls, the more her interest turns to novels, until she cannot read anything at all. *The Coquette* is a subversive critique of a political structure that stifles women, illustrating the dangers to women of chasing personal freedom in a society that does not offer that opportunity.

Belinda’s Sociopolitical Context

I want to first consider the call for reason and domestic reading in *Belinda*. To do so, it is important to understand Edgeworth’s background. Maria Edgeworth was Britain’s most famous novelist from 1800 until Walter Scott's *Waverley* appeared in 1814. She used the novel of manners as a vehicle for representing ideas of national unity in the wake of a revolutionary crisis that threatened to divide Britain. She also helped create the main tradition of nineteenth-century children's literature. Both types of Edgeworth’s fiction were dedicated to developing moral, rational individuals, who would construct their own families and communities through affection. These communities would then construct a nation of educated and rational citizens. This of a domestic society was rooted in Enlightenment epistemology.

Maria Edgeworth was born in Oxfordshire in 1768. Her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, had seen dissipated upper-class English society, and committed his own family to value science, literature, progress, and liberal ideas about education and politics. In 1782, Richard Edgeworth, inspired by a new Irish patriotism, moved the

family to their ancestral estate of Edgeworthstown in County Longford, Ireland. In 1791 Maria Edgeworth returned to England, but in keeping with her father's progressive philosophy, was critical of the fashionable society which the French Revolution exposed as irresponsible--a major theme of her writings. Many critics accused the novel of encouraging women's emotional nature, and during the 1790s, anxiety the novel was heightened by feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft, who, ironically, was committed to the same Enlightenment philosophy as Edgeworth. So Edgeworth focused on education, and in 1795 she published *Letters for Literary Ladies*, which considered women's intellectual nature. Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace notes that in *Letters*, Edgeworth "argues that rationalist, education benefits women: 'Women have not erred from having knowledge, but from not having experience'" (99). Based on their influential *Practical Education* (1801), Nancy Armstrong points out how the Edgeworths' program "gives priority to the schoolroom and parlor over the church and courts in regulating all human behavior" (Desire 15). Edgeworth expanded on this theme in *Moral Tales for Young People* (1801), encouraging child development aimed at constructing rational, socially responsible citizens, who as adults could serve as social and political leaders. While Edgeworth argued for women's intellectual rights, she insisted that women exert their influence strictly from within the domestic sphere. This is the theme of *Belinda*, Edgeworth's three-volume novel of manners.

***Belinda* as Social Critique**

In *Northanger Abbey* (1818), Jane Austen acknowledges Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth when the narrator protests against those who say of novels: “It is only Cecilia or Camilla, or Belinda.” Austen objects to novelists’ disparaging their own genre, as Edgeworth does when she offers *Belinda* as a “Moral Tale--the author not wishing to acknowledge a Novel.” But *Belinda* is a novel, with satirical twists. Lady Delacour jokes that while society disparages novels, Belinda recalls Burney's Camilla, concerned about being misled by a devious woman . In fact, when Lady Delacour shares her life story with Belinda, she claims: “I never read or listened to a moral at the end of a story in my life...My dear, you will be woefully disappointed if in my story you expect anything like a novel” (28). Ironically, Lady Delacour's life is part of a novel.

Edgeworth, like other post-revolutionary women novelists, attacks “fashionable” literature and the literature of Sensibility, which many considered transgressive. Although *Belinda*’s preface denies it is a “novel,” in its social realism *Belinda* mimics the “novel of manners” plot of a young lady's entrance into society and her exposure to the dangers of court culture, as well as engaging themes of social reform. In *Belinda*, Edgeworth develops conservative social criticism, calling on upper and middle-class women to reform society and stabilize the state by operating as rational agents within the domestic sphere. This recalls the stance of feminists who argued that social stability depended on women with sufficient knowledge, morals, and public spirit to eliminate court culture from the home, and thus from politics and the state. Edgeworth used the novel to highlight national issues.

But *Belinda* is not just a didactic novel, and Belinda Portman is not a typical heroine. Marjorie Lightfoot asserts that *Belinda* is “subversive, satirically addressing issues of colonialism, women's relation with men, the trustworthiness of literature as a guide to life, and conflicting views of the nature and purpose of life” (118).¹ In fact, *Belinda* was originally more cutting edge in its treatment of such issues, but Edgeworth consented to revisions in the 1802 and 1810 editions to pacify critics. She agreed to represent the Jamaican Mr. Vincent as Belinda's suitor, not her fiancé, and to have the white English farm girl marry an Englishman instead of Juba, Mr. Vincent's black West Indian servant. But the novel still features insights about prejudice and self-deception, making it clear that failure to know one's self breeds distrust.

In Edgeworth's world, Ireland and Britain continued in a state of crisis, and during a visit to France, Edgeworth became more familiar with French culture and literature, and more critical of courtly decadence. Her feeling was echoed by others as Britain failed to turn back challenges from Napoleon – a failure blamed on Britain's ruling class. The death of Edgeworth's father in 1817 devastated her. She completed his autobiography, and as she feared, his politics were attacked by critics, and he was accused of contaminating her writing. She began to fear publishing, but a visit to London renewed her faith in the domestic woman. Society was different after the death of George IV, and Romantic literature offered new critiques. In response, Edgeworth produced the

¹ Kathryn Kirkpatrick argues that “as a woman of the Anglo-Irish gentry, Edgeworth wrote from the conflicted position of a subordinate member of a ruling class within a colonized country,” and that there are “elements of a radical critique of the colonialist enterprise” in both *Castle Rackrent* and *Belinda* (51).

novel *Helen* (1834), which implies that female virtues contribute more to the reconstruction of Britain than Reform Bills.

Throughout her career, Maria Edgeworth addressed fashionability's threat to domesticity. In *Belinda*, Edgeworth champions domesticity through the courtships of Belinda Portman and Virginia St. Pierre, but the novel's main focus is the transformation of the fashionable Lady Delacour into a domestic woman and reader. The novel begins as the heroine, Belinda Portman, is left in the charge of Lady Delacour to find a husband. Belinda sees past the surface of Lady Delacour's courtly life and discovers her moral and physical suffering. Belinda attempts to reform Lady Delacour, but when she is accused of hypocrisy, Belinda leaves the Delacour home to stay with the Percivals, a model, domestic family. She returns to Lady Delacour to help her through cancer treatment and to help repair her marriage, all the while juggling three suitors: the "rake" Sir Philip Baddely, the colonial Mr. Vincent, and Clarence Hervey - the philosopher hero. *Belinda* is written with a tripartite narrative structure, designed to make points about domesticity and its companion – appropriate reading material. The first narrative is Belinda's quest for individualism. The third narrative focuses on the naïve Virginia St. Pierre, whose name echoes the "child of nature" in Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's 1787 sentimental novel, *Paul et Virginie*. But the second plot, that of the scintillating Lady Delacour, receives the most attention. As Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace notes, "In short...*Belinda* is not about Belinda" (110).

In *Belinda*, Edgeworth champions a type of domesticity necessary to support a new style of patriarchy. Kowaleski-Wallace explains that "over the course of the

eighteenth century, older-style patriarchy, with its emphasis on paternal prerogative, hierarchy, and force, had gradually yielded to new-style patriarchy with its appeal to reason, cooperation between the sexes, and noncoercive exercise of authority” (110). Acting as pillars of this new-style patriarchy, the proper lady and the domestic woman are characterized by their ability to control desire. However, critics such as Poovey and Armstrong have noted that this idealized concept of femininity, represented in *Belinda* by the model Anne Percival, is constantly confronted with alternate feminine identities, represented in *Belinda* most obviously by Lady Delacour and her masculine “friend,” Harriet Freke. In *Belinda*, each female character is characterized by what she reads, how she reads, and where she reads. *Belinda* as a novel is pressed into service. It is not a sentimental, Gothic, or didactic novel, but it uses elements of each to warn against the behavior of urban society, measuring the characters' behavior against that found in other novels, poetry, and drama.²

The Dangers of Fashionable and Female Reading

The first character's moral and literary path to consider is that of our heroine, Belinda Portman. Before Belinda became a ward of her conniving aunt, Mrs. Stanhope,

² Characters in *Belinda* allude frequently to Restoration drama of the period, including Congreve's *The Double Dealer* (1694) and *The Way of the World* (1700); Farquhar's *The Beaux' Stratagem* (1707); Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787); Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775), *The School for Scandal* (1777), and *The Critic* (1779). Edgeworth also offers literary criticism in her allusion to disparate works such as Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, Radcliffe's fiction, Fordyce's *Sermons for Young Women*, and through parodies of other genres. She ridicules the sentimental novel in the Virginia St. Pierre narrative, the story of Rachel Hartley, renamed Virginia by Clarence Hervey to honor the author of *Paul et Virginie* (1788). Edgeworth's descriptive names for her characters - Belinda Portman, Clarence Hervey, Delacour, Freke, Lawless, Boucher, Percival, Dr. X - are also opportunities for allusion. The heroine's name reminds the other characters, as well as the reader of Pope's Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock* (1712). However, Edgeworth's heroine keeps her hair and is rewarded with a reformed lover.

she “had been educated chiefly in the country; she had early been inspired with a taste for domestic pleasures; she was fond of reading, and disposed to conduct herself with prudence and integrity” (1). This rural, domestic background has not prepared Belinda for fashionable life, and while her “taste for literature” initially declines “in proportion to her intercourse with the fashionable world,” she revisits her love of reading when she discovers the duplicity of urban society at a masquerade ball (4). After hearing Clarence Hervey compare her to Packwood’s razor straps, Belinda retreats into the Delacour’s library, refusing to advertise herself in the marriage market. Her reading is not dangerous or secret. It does not consist of romances or novels, condemned under the umbrella of “female reading.” Instead, Belinda reads nonfiction by Adam Smith, Jean De La Bruyere, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, and John Aiken, and when she reads fiction, it is the moral tales of Jean-Francois Marmontel and John Moore. Belinda’s ability to resist both female reading and the fashionable world enable her to reform Lady Delacour, because as Heather MacFayden notes, “domestic reading acts as a counter to the world of fashion and the flux that is its fundamental characteristic” (427-8).

Although Belinda is the novel’s heroine, her relationship with Lady Delacour is the heart of the story. The value assigned to texts in the narrative of Lady Delacour’s domestic failure is particularly Edgworthian. Edgworth couples examples of domestic failure and questionable sexual behavior with corresponding acts of literary transgression. Lady Delacour’s fashionable persona is largely founded upon her literary knowledge and skills, and she supplements her theatricality with references to texts. In fact, Lady Delacour outquotes the other characters eight to one. MacFayden argues, “Her deliberate

proliferation of literary references through quotation, parody, and allusion is her most distinctive form of self-display,” and through such display, Edgeworth develops the trope of fashionable reading (426).

Traditionally, the fashionable reader misuses her literary knowledge to support her social position. She also shares characteristics with her counterpart, the female reader, represented in *Belinda* by Virginia St. Pierre. While Lady Delacour uses texts to develop her fashionable identity, Belinda, a domestic reader, uses her literary knowledge to regulate her own desires and ultimately, those of Lady Delacour herself.

The tropes of fashionable reading and female reading both represent reading as antidomestic and problematize the relationship of the female body to textuality. Female reading highlights the secrecy and eroticism of the passive reader and exposes readers to threats of seduction. In her social isolation, Virginia St. Pierre’s unsupervised novel reading exacerbates the sexual desires that confuse her and drive her nightmares.³ But while Virginia becomes a kind, loyal young woman, Hervey finds himself drawn to the more intellectually astute Belinda. As Hervey matures, he learns to appreciate Belinda’s virtues which are based on reason, rather than Virginia’s which are based in sentiment. Virginia’s cautionary narrative serves a dual purpose. Through her story, Edgeworth argues for the importance of the domestic sphere by demonstrating the dangerous effects of isolation, and also protests against “Rousseau’s infantilization of women” (Kowaleski

³ During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when novel reading was negatively associated with women, pleasure, and sex, the trope of female reading represents women’s reading as a physical act, and their responses to literature as forms of gluttony. MacFayden notes that while Edgeworth draws on the trope of female reading, “over the course of her canon she develops two alternate ways of viewing women’s reading: the equally troubling trope of fashionable reading associated with Lady Delacour and the corrective trope of domestic reading associated with Belinda” (426).

101).⁴ Edgeworth uses Lady Delacour's narrative to make a similar case by exposing the dangers of excessive publicity. The female reader acts out her sexual drama in private, but the fashionable reader stays on display.

In addition to keeping herself center stage, Lady Delacour's textual practices draw Belinda into public display, driving many of the novel's conflicts. Lady Delacour's literary allusions are guided by the fashionable world's sexual ethic, negotiating courtship and marriage through publicity. But Belinda resists public display, thwarting her Aunt Stanhope's and Lady Delacour's attempts to market her. Belinda's distaste for Lady Delacour's efforts is evident when she refuses to entertain Clarence Hervey while Lady Delacour is out. When she learns about the incident, Lady Delacour invites Hervey to the library, crying a line from Voltaire's *Zara* (1732) "Shine out, appear, be found, my lovely Zara!" (67). This allusion highlights Lady's Delacour's determination that Belinda participate in the display necessary to succeed in fashionable society. Lady Delcaour proceeds with her allusions when she finds Belinda in the library and remarks, "Here she is – what doing I know not – studying Hervey's *Mediations on the Tombs*, I should guess" (67). Through this reference to James Hervey's 1746 work, Lady Delacour unwittingly conveys her obsession with death while suggesting that Belinda has an interest in the actual Clarence Hervey. During the same visit, another meeting of text and courtship occurs when Lady Delacour stages a scene from *The Rape of the Lock*. Hervey plays Madame de Pomenars until Lady Delacour pulls a comb from Belinda's hair, and

⁴ Kowaleski points out that "the paradigmatic example of a male author who blocks women and thwarts their development is Rousseau," and Hervey, based on Thomas Day, plans to raise his own Sophia (100).

he is stunned by “the sight of the finest hair that he had ever beheld” (69). Belinda is horrified and manages to escape the scene.

While Lady Delacour employs literary references in the service of uniting Belinda and Hervey, she inserts herself into the relationship. When she masquerades as Queen Elizabeth and Hervey is in costume as the Earl of Essex. Belinda’s “deep blush” while witnessing this suggestive scene alerts Hervey to its inappropriate nature. Due to a wardrobe malfunction, this charade also reveals to Dr. X that Lady Delacour is hiding a “disease” of her breast, and that her gaiety is not the product of “a sound mind” (107). Lady Delacour believes she is dying, yet masks the pain with wit, drugs, and make-up. The drugs dull the pain of an injury to her breast that occurred when her gun backfired during a fashionable duel. Her fear keeps her from seeing a credible physician. After this scene, Dr. X has a serious discussion with Hervey, urging him to be “useful to his fellow-creatures” and lead a meaningful life (108). Edgeworth’s suggestion that in order to transform the world, we must first cultivate ourselves is the moral of *Belinda*. Hervey ceases his vacuous admiration of Lady Delacour when he recognizes that what she really needs is a friend. To heal herself and her dissipated home, Lady Delacour needs friends and the guidance of domestic reading. Her ability to recover hinges on her ability to recognize the difference between admiration and friendship. Belinda drives this process as she withdraws from fashionable society into the domestic world of the Percivals.

Reforming Lady Delacour as a Woman and a Reader

To reform Lady Delacour, Belinda must uncover the secret behind her fractured family. Belinda reforms the Delacour home when she engineers Lady Delacour's daughter's return, and with that, a new relationship to literary texts. One afternoon, Lady Delacour asks Belinda to read some letters, and is surprised by Belinda's reaction to one. When Belinda urges Lady Delacour to read her daughter Helena's epistles, Lady Delacour discovers that her daughter writes well, as well as her affection for Lady Anne Percival. Lady Delacour is jealous, but as MacFayden points out, "ultimately, it is less the content of Helena's letters that is important than the act of reading them, for in reading Lady Delacour enacts the maternal and domestic identity that is essential to proper femininity" (432). Helena returns home and spreads the positive influence of the Percivals, especially their literary practices – practices essential to her mother's "cure."

Lady Delacour's reunion with Helena occurs in the library prior to a fashionable reading party game involving the *Sortes Virgilianae*. Lady Delacour opens Marmontel's book to "a description of the manner in which la femme comme il y en a peu managed a husband who was excessively afraid of being thought to be governed by his wife" (166). The uncomfortable resemblance of this passage to her own marriage makes Lady Delacour suspicious that Belinda and Hervey have engineered this scene. Edgeworth uses this moment to instill the Percival model of conduct in the Delacour's dissipated household, as the association of Lady Delacour and "la femme" has been made by Lady Anne earlier in the novel.

The character of Lady Anne Percival represents a domestic model of female empowerment. As Kowaleski-Wallace notes, “ In a world where the power assigned to mothers depends on the simultaneous restriction of female activity to the domestic sphere; if women are accorded power at home over the education and development of their children, at the same time they are prohibited from participating directly in other aspects of social and political life” (118). As a result, Edgeworth (via Lady Anne) conveys to female readers that they must cultivate alternative avenues to meaningfully utilize their female virtues. Lady Anne, with direction from her husband, superintends her children’s progressive education and Belinda notes how the Percival children benefit from their mother’s attention. Lady Anne also keeps her husband attracted to the home, making her role as wife and mother pivotal in the family fabric.

The masculine feminist, Harriet Freke, is a foil to Lady Anne. While Belinda is alone at the Percival’s reading one of Mr. Percival’s recommended books, Freke barges in and tries to drag Belinda away, but is rebuked and misquotes Milton, advertising her lack of literary knowledge and associating herself with Satan. Her behavior reeks of old-style patriarchy, with revolutionary undertones. In her irrational enthusiasm, she recalls the lower class. She does not understand that discipline comes from within. Kowlaski argues that through Freke, Edgeworth “alerts her readers to the similarities between aberrant female passion and the undisciplined lower orders or ‘mob’; both are ‘monstrous’ forces threatening the stability of the status quo” (175). Freke represents the disruptive potential of women outside of the domestic sphere. In the Percival’s model

home, Edgeworth reads a solution to the political threats from without and the internal threats from within the female character.

Lady Delacour exists between these two extreme representations of female deportment, and must learn to strike a balance between her domestic responsibilities and her independent inclinations. After the game involving the *Sortes*, Lady Delacour regrets that she cannot be the heroine of such a text. Until she has the courage to trust her husband, she cannot reform. Belinda convinces Lady Delacour to expose her “disease” to her husband and to Dr. X. But other secrets must also be revealed. Fearing surgery, Lady Delacour begins reading religious texts, recalling the secret reading of the female reader. She is ashamed of these “methodistical” texts, and locks them away. MacFayden notes that “operating outside rational discourse and sociable domestic space, Lady Delacour’s religious reading is linked to the motifs of disease and morbidity” (436). Her religious reading also produces wrong interpretations, as seen in the episode when Harriot Freke believes Lady Delacour has a lover. To catch them, Freke dresses as a ghost, leading Lady Delacour to believe she sees a portent to her death. When she confesses her fear to Dr. X and Belinda, they excommunicate Freke from Lady Delacour’s circle.

The final element of Lady Delacour’s cure hinges on literary texts. Back in good mental and physical health, Lady Delacour attends to her family library, complaining that the books are in “dreadful confusion” (308). She asks Dr. X to “recommend a librarian to my lord – not a chaplain” (309). By organizing the library, Lady Delacour reassumes her domestic role. Because of the importance of texts in *Belinda*, the reader assumes that Dr. X will provide an actual librarian, but he suggests someone capable of healing Lady

Delcour from her obsessive religious reading, framing Chaplain Moreton's arrival with a reference to the *Canterbury Tales*. Moreton relieves Lady Delacour from "the terrors of Methodism" and introduces her to "the consolations of mild and rational piety" (312).⁵ With this final piece of the puzzle in place, Lady Delacour's transformation to a domestic reader is complete.

Right Reading Generates the Right Conclusion

Lady Delacour's domestic reading is vital to the novel's concluding scene, in which she identifies life with a novel, asking her circle, "shall I finish the novel for you?" (477). Following a debate about how to conclude a narrative about a female reader's confusion, a domestic reader's courtship, and a fashionable reader's reform, Lady Delacour uses theatricality to reunite Virginia and her father, and Hervey with Belinda. She claims that she can conclude the novel in two lines, and speaking as a "reformed rake" concludes: "Our *tale* contains a *moral*; and, no doubt, / You all have wit enough to find it out" (433-34). As Lightfoot states, "This ending teases the audience for its hypocritical insistence on didacticism to justify literature that is read, as *Belinda* is, for its universal delight and subversive insight." Thankfully, even as a domestic reader Lady Delacour maintains her verve. MacFayden points out that: "By reforming Lady Delacour

⁵ John Wesley, his brother Charles, and George Whitfield were at Oxford in the late 1720's where they were members of a "Holy Club" which became known as *methodists* because they approached Bible study by method. Critics of the movement accused Methodists of suffering from "enthusiasm," which in the late eighteenth century meant excess emotion. Women were often accused of the same affliction.

rather than silencing her, Edgeworth implies that a woman's literary skill can coincide with domestic propriety" (439).

When Edgeworth was asked by Mrs. Barbould to revise *Belinda* for the *British Novelists* series (1810), Edgeworth responded, "I was really so provoked with the cold tameness of that stick or stone Belinda that I could have torn the pages to pieces" (qtd. Butler "Maria" 494). While Belinda's reason and reserve may pale in comparison to Lady Delacour's sparkle, the novel suggests that Belinda's qualities are required to heal and stabilize a nation suffering from aristocratic excess, revolutionary aftershocks from the French Revolution, and in the midst of the Napoleonic Wars. Despite Edgeworth's vitriolic reaction to her "heroine," Belinda becomes interesting when she learns how to use guile and reason to maintain her integrity. Along the way, Belinda learns that caution, experience, and education are necessary to live a happy, useful life, but there are no guarantees.⁶ The novel states that one *ought* to live a moral, rational life, but acknowledges that it is difficult to do. In *Belinda*, there are no guarantees, but those who seek self-knowledge have the best chance of finding personal fulfillment, and becoming "useful" members of society.

⁶ Deep into the novel, the narrator announces that the moral instinct needs to be controlled "by reason and religion," but in the novel, religion is complicated and although "reason" is championed, logic is rare in the world of the fashionable Delacours, the moral but misjudging Percivals, or in the noble savages like the sentimental Virginia and the gambling Mr. Vincent (380).

America's Unfulfilled Promise in Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*

So how much is self-knowledge worth? *The Coquette* suggests that self-knowledge is essential to a woman's survival in the early republic. Like *Belinda*, *The Coquette* warns of the personal and social disorder that a lack of self-knowledge and unregulated freedom brings, but unlike Edgeworth, Foster also warns about the dangers of un-American class based ideals. The novel's heroine, the witty, articulate Eliza Wharton, is ruined by her misunderstanding of "freedom," and her lack of self-knowledge leaves her vulnerable to dangers that ultimately kill her. She freely admits early in the novel that "Self-knowledge...that most important of all sciences, I have yet to learn. Such have been my situations in life, and the natural volatility of my temper, that I have looked but little into my own heart" (28-9).

Eliza's "situations" are the heart of *The Coquette*. Free white women in the early republic in theory enjoyed "equal rights" with men, and were expected to embrace the dominant political culture which promoted dual spheres, with women shouldering the responsibility of educating the next generation in the values of the new republic from within the home, and with men exercising these values with their vote. In *The Coquette*, Foster exposes "dual spheres" as a double standard for men and women, and even Mrs. Richman, a model republican wife, articulates the political limitations women suffer as "citizens" in the new nation:

If the community flourish and enjoy health and freedom, shall we not share in the happy effect? If it be oppressed and disturbed, shall we not endure our proportion of the evil? Why then should the love of country be a masculine passion only? Why should government, which involves the peace and order of the society, of which we are a part, be wholly excluded from our observation? (44)

Although women could not speak publicly, vote, or bear arms, Foster proposed that women take an interest in public affairs. Barbara Bardes and Suzanne Gossett note how “fiction here informs us about attitudes towards women’s role in the Republic just before the beginning of the nineteenth century; Mrs. Richman’s rhetorical questions, which suggest that others may hold beliefs contrary to hers, hint at the areas of tension about that role” (4).

Eliza Wharton is an articulate, intelligent woman operating in the borderland between the confines of marriage and the unfulfilled promise of sympathetic sisterhood. Many scholars, such as Cathy Davidson, comment on *The Coquette’s* exposure of the marital situation of late eighteenth-century women, but do not focus on Foster’s subversive critique of a society that did not formally educate women, stripped them of legal rights when they married, and confined them to the home, yet expected them to anchor patriotic, moral families. I argue that Foster is more concerned with inconsistencies in the Federalist political model than the topic of marriage. Sharon Harris writes that before women won the right to vote, “the suppression of women’s political voices was not only a legal and civic silencing but was equally prevalent in the literary arts, where women’s writings often were reclassified as “domestic” or “sentimental” and thereby marginalized in studies of the political novel” (1). Foster’s novel is a subversive challenge to a political order which does not fulfill the promise of America to half of its population.

Being “Unprepared” – Eliza Wharton’s Education

Deep into the novel, Eliza remarks upon her bleak future: “The world is to me a desert! ...And, when I have recourse to books, if I read those of serious description, they remind me of an awful futurity, for which I am unprepared” (135). Being “unprepared” is a central theme in *The Coquette*, as Foster tackles the problem of a society that leaves young women unprepared to assume meaningful roles in a democratic republic. In the novel’s opening letter, Eliza acknowledges that “both nature and education had instilled into my mind an implicit obedience to the will and desires of my parents,” obedience that is expected to extend to all authority figures in her society under the guise of “duty” (5). Eliza’s mother sums up the value of a woman’s education when she writes to Eliza that in her widowed state: “The expanding virtues of my children soothed and exhilarated my drooping spirits; and my attention to their education, and interest, was amply rewarded by their proficiency and duty” (40). Eliza’s education is referenced throughout the novel, supporting Cathy Davidson’s argument that Foster’s emphasis on women’s education is “unparalleled in early American fiction” (*Revolution* 78). But what is meant by “education” in an era when formal learning for women was virtually nonexistent? Foster pairs nature and education to expose the oppression that Judith Sargent Murray challenged in her 1790 essay, “On the Equality of the Sexes.” Murray argues that because women are denied a formal education, they cannot develop their natural intellectual abilities:

after we have from early youth been adorned with ribbons, and other gewgaws ... we are introduced into the world, amid the united adulation of every beholder. ... We must be constantly upon our guard; prudence and discretion must be our

characteristics; and we must rise superior to, and obtain a complete victory over those who have been long adding to the native strength of their minds, by an unremitting study of men and books. (1036-37)

Murray also notes that “the smallest deviation” in conduct leads to “infamy” (1037).

Through Eliza’s “deviation” and subsequent demise, Foster exposes the political origins of women’s inadequate education in *The Coquette*.

Interpreting Foster’s Message

The Coquette is not a simple, sentimental “warning to the American fair.” Its complex heroine and subversive nature have inspired numerous interpretations about its cultural and political message. Linda Kerber argues that *The Coquette* is a warning against women’s novel reading. Claire Pettengill attributes Eliza’s fall to her failure to embrace republican sisterhood. Julia Stern notes how “sisterhood” is an ideological contradiction, serving a “conservative social purpose by limiting women to the roles of ‘republican wives’...and ‘republican mothers’” (74). Still another group emphasizes the novels’ affinities with an emerging liberalism. Cathy Davidson reads Eliza’s desire for freedom with Wollstonecraftian ideas about female equality, and Smith-Rosenberg reads Eliza’s dilemma as individualism struggling against conservative ideals which sacrifice economic self-interest in the service of the public good. All of these avenues at some level consider Foster’s uneasy relationship with conservative republican culture.

To consider Foster’s message, it is important to understand her background and attachment to the story. Foster was born in Salisbury, Massachusetts to Grant Webster, a wealthy Boston merchant, and Hannah Wainwright Webster. She was sent to boarding

school after her mother died, and in 1785 she married the Reverend John Foster with whom she had six children. After writing the wildly popular *The Coquette*, Foster wrote her second and final novel, *The Boarding School* (1798), which also advocates for women's education, and holds men accountable for their sexual behavior. Later, she became a contributor to a Federalist journal that later became *The North American Review*, and encouraged her daughters, Eliza Lansford Cushing and Harriet Vaughan Cheney to write. After her husband's death, Foster lived in Montreal with her daughters where she died at the age of eighty-one.

The Coquette was published anonymously in 1797 and was one of only two American novels in the 1790's (the other was Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple. A Tale of Truth*) to be a bestseller. Like many novels of the day, *The Coquette* claims to be "Founded on Fact," catering to the suspicion of novels in the early republic. Cathy Davidson remarks that such claims are "mere conventions, a quaint relic of the American novel's early days as an upstart, none-too-respectable literary form" (19). But *The Coquette* is based on fact. It is the story of Eliza Wharton, who at the beginning of the novel has been released from an engagement by the death of her fiancée, the Rev. Haly. After this experience, Eliza focuses on female friendship and personal freedom. While staying with her friends, the model Richmans, she is courted by two suitors - Rev. Boyer, a respectable but boring clergyman and Major Peter Sanford, an aristocratic rake. Because of her indecision and flirtation with Sanford, Boyer abandons his suit, while Sanford marries another woman for her fortune. Too late, Eliza decides that she loves Boyer and begs him to take her back, but he is already engaged to another woman.

Sanford manages to seduce the depressed Eliza, and they have an affair until, overcome by guilt, Eliza leaves home and like the real-life Elizabeth Whitman, dies in childbirth and is buried by strangers.

The Coquette is based on the life of Elizabeth Whitman (1752-88) of Hartford, Connecticut, Foster's second cousin by marriage, whose death at an inn after giving birth to a stillborn child was widely publicized in the New England papers. Like her fictional counterpart, Whitman was accomplished and admired. She had been engaged to the Rev. Joseph Howe, (Foster's Rev. Haly), and then later to the Rev. Joseph Buckminster (Foster's Rev. Boyer), and was courted by the poet Joel Barlow. Whitman, under the name "Mrs. Walker," arrived in June 1788 at the Bell Tavern in Danvers, Massachusetts under the pretence of waiting for her husband, but when she died two weeks later after delivering a stillborn child, no man had appeared. Her lover's identity remains unknown (he is ironically referred to as "Fidelio" in her letters), but there is evidence that Pierrepont Edwards was the prototype for Sanford. Her death notices in the papers, which Cathy Davidson notes were "the stuff of good rumor, of gossip, of sentimental novels" turned her death into a cautionary tale. Post-mortem charges against Whitman cited romance novel reading as a cause of her downfall, with the *Massachusetts Centinel* claiming that Whitman was "a great reader of romances, and having formed her notions of happiness from that corrupt source, became vain and coquettish" (qtd. Harris). If reading novels was scandalous, writing them was even more so.

In the early republic, as evidenced by the number of conduct manuals, writing about virtue was popular. Writing about vice was different. For Foster, a minister's wife,

to write a novel about the seduction of a middle class woman was tricky. Eliza Wharton is an active agent in her own drama, a fact which Jennifer Harris notes, “magnif[ies] the criminality of her acts—and these were crimes according to both the law and morality of her time” (xxx). For a woman to write a novel at all was potentially scandalous.⁷

Americans retained Puritan prejudices against fiction, and vilified the novel in particular. Foster use of the epistolary form protected her against charges of impropriety, as it both obscured her hand, and led readers to accept her novel as “a tale of truth.” Although *The Coquette* was published anonymously, Foster’s authorship was an open secret as was her connection to Whitman, leading readers to assume the novel is informed by insider knowledge.

The Price of Freedom

Epistles in *The Coquette* appear chronologically. It takes eight letters to set up the plot which pivots on Eliza, Sanford and Boyer, and to develop correspondences between Eliza and Lucy Freeman, Boyer and Mr. Selby, and Sanford to Charles Deighton.⁸ The letters are a means of characterization, employing voices that vary from Boyer’s formal

⁷ Scholars agree that in the early republic, terms like “fiction,” “novel and “literary” had fluctuating meanings . Maria Sanchez notes that in the early nineteenth century, the term “‘literature’ typically signified culturally valued writing of all kinds, including works of history, theology, philosophy, and the sciences. Bestowing the descriptor ‘literary’ upon a work meant imbuing it with connotation of learning and prestige” (17). As a result, “the novel” was rarely placed under the umbrella of “literature.”

⁸ The primary correspondence between Eliza and Lucy Freeman occurs when Lucy’s marriage separates them. While this separation drives the plot, it also highlights how marriage isolated women, forcing them to rely on textual communication. Ivy Schweitzer asks, “Can friendship, as a social and political mode of democratic relation modeled by educated women, be maintained through textuality?” (115). In this novel it cannot, highlighting the dangers of an ideology that isolates women from the public sphere.

diction, to Eliza's colloquial discourse, to Sanford's wit. Eliza's letters reveal her emotional state, and from her rejection by Boyer to her seduction by Sanford, Julia Stern points out how Eliza's letters chart "a trajectory of increasing social withdrawal, domestic confinement, physical immobility, and epistolary silence," and how in her attempts to escape stifling domesticity, she ends up "as confined, homebound, and trammled as the most docile of republican wives" (142).

Eliza's desire for freedom is threatening to the status quo because she wants to enjoy two disparate things. She desires the liberty to exercise freedoms enjoyed by white men, and the intimacy associated with female friendship. She wants to circulate freely, and she is equipped to do so. Boyer writes to Selby after first meeting Eliza that "She discovers an elevated mind, a ready apprehension, and an accurate knowledge of the various subjects which have been brought into view" (11). Even the grim Mr. Selby acknowledges Eliza's intelligence and social skills when he reports that in "conversation...Miss Wharton sustained her part with great propriety. Indeed, she discovers a fund of useful knowledge, and extensive reading which render her peculiarly entertaining" (46). Schweitzer points out that "Eliza excels in the rational discourse associated with the republican era print/text culture identified by Michael Warner as well as in the affective, bodily based vocal performances of nation propounded by Jay Fliegelman." (109). Eliza dreads isolation from the public sphere, the master of which is Major Peter Sanford.

Foster, like other American authors, presents the rake as the embodiment of foreign threats to national stability. He is a devious manipulator, a threat to family life,

and by extension a threat to the nation. For example, Sanford wins Eliza's confidence by asking to "be admitted to enjoy her society as a brother," recalling an illicit attraction from *The Power of Sympathy* (132). Rakes traditionally operate on corrupt European morals, and accordingly, Sanford is directly associated with English aristocracy; Mrs. Richman refers to him as a "second Lovelace," and Julia Granby calls him "a Chesterfieldian," while he is described as enjoying "a life of dissipation and gaiety" (38, 111, 37). He embodies libertinism.

Sanford's association with Lovelace and Lord Chesterfield is emblematic of anti-British and anti-French sentiment in the early republic. Gareth Evans point out that when America passed *the* Alien and Sedition Laws in 1798, it tried to end what Secretary of *the* Navy George Cabot termed 'the cursed foul contagion of French principles' (qtd. Evans 12). To control the rake, sentimental novelists developed the republican father—a new-style patriarch representing middle-class values. The good, republican father is a stock figure in post-revolutionary American writing - a middle-class patriarch who, like Edgeworth's Mr. Percival, earns obedience through respect. The model woman in sentimental novels who cooperates with these patriarchs is offered a limited amount of public influence. Fallen women have rejected their supporting role. To enjoy political influence, women must be politic and eschew direct political action.

Rev. Boyer is poised to become a new-style patriarch. Eliza readily admits that he is a "gentleman of merit and respectability," but she remains attracted to Sanford (39). Eliza dismisses the advice of her friends who claim that marrying Boyer will enable her to unite virtue, happiness, freedom, and self-interest. Lucy advises her to make a safe

investment: “Whatever, you can reasonably expect in a lover, husband, or friend, you may perceive to be united in this worthy man. His situation in life, is perhaps, as elevated as you have a right to claim” (27). Likewise, Mrs. Richman counters Eliza's claim that marriage will limit her freedom by explaining that she has “wrong ideas of freedom and matrimony” (30). Eliza does not buy Mrs. Richman's argument, nor does she fall because she is “a venture-capitalist” in a society ambivalent about its “new capitalist and individualist economy” (Smith-Rosenberg 178). Foster suggests that the value of a parson trumps worthless, aristocratic stock, and that real freedom depends on self-control.

In a letter to Eliza applauding her resolution to resist Sanford, Lucy quotes: “In spite of all the virtue we can boast, /The woman that deliberates is lost,” from Joseph Addison's 1712 play, *Cato, a Tragedy*, which deals with themes of individual liberty versus tyranny (63). But Eliza continues to deliberate, because in spite of his lip service to equality, she realizes that Boyer will never regard her as an equal. In a letter to Eliza, he quotes from James Thomson's poem “Spring” “An elegant sufficiency, / Content, retirement, rural quiet, friendship; / Books, ease and alternate labor, useful life; /... These are the matchless joys of virtuous love” (42). In response, Eliza questions: “is it not difficult to ascertain what we can pronounce ‘an elegant sufficiency?’”(47). While the educated Boyer misspells Thompson's name and Eliza chides him for taking the lines out of context, her response is also self-interested. Eliza can imagine what marriage to Boyer will entail, and she is probably right. Early in the novel, Boyer writes to Selby that as Eliza's husband, he will “regulate” her “gay disposition,” but that “a cheerful wife is

peculiarly necessary to a person of studious and sedentary life” (11-12). Boyer’s highest regard is clearly for himself.

Eliza dreads the stultifying life she would suffer with Boyer, and conveys this sentiment to Lucy, whose bitter reply foregrounds society’s lack of sympathy: “And so you wish to have my opinion before you know the result of your own...” (26).

Considering Eliza’s “accomplished mind,” Lucy’s accusation that she has no opinion is absurd. Of course Eliza has an opinion, but as she explains to Sanford, “I have but lately entered society; and wish, for a while, to enjoy my freedom” (50). The dispute between Eliza and the other women over the meaning of marriage invites a consideration of marriage in the early republic. In late eighteenth-century America, marriage was not “domestic tranquility.” For women, marriage entailed the forfeiture of their property and many legal rights, potential abandonment, and the possibility of death in childbirth. *The Coquette* acknowledges these realities by making readers privy to the opinions of an intelligent woman. After Rev. Haly’s death, when friends encourage Eliza to again consider marriage, she resists. When Boyer begins his suit, she writes, “I wish not a declaration from any one” (12). If marriage represents Federalist political structure, Eliza should reject Boyer’s “declaration.” The Declaration of Independence did women little service. Sanford observes that if Eliza marries, she will become “the property of another,” recognizing her nature as one that will suffocate in domestic isolation (35).

Cathy Davidson has shown, “Implicitly and explicitly... novels acknowledge that married life can be bitterly unhappy and encourage women to circumvent disaster by weighing any prospective suitors in the balance of good sense” (113). Foster alerts

readers to the threats of rakes and republican rhetoric to help them avoid an unhappy fate. The following conversation between Eliza and Mrs. Richman is an example of such rhetoric. Eliza expresses her opinion that: "Marriage is the tomb of friendship. It appears to me a very selfish state..former acquaintances are neglected or forgotten" (24). Mrs. Richman "corrects" her by stressing the importance of subordinating personal desires: "It is the glory of the marriage state...to refine, by circumscribing our enjoyments" (24). Eliza's mother espouses the same rhetoric when she tries to assuage Eliza's concerns about sacrificing freedom: "With regard to [marriage] being a dependent situation, what one is not so? Are we not all links in the great chain of society?" (41). Theirs is not a democratic vision.

Eliza's statement about marriage as a "tomb" is often criticized as selfish, but Lucy's behavior validates her fears. Before becoming Mrs. Sumner, Lucy writes four long epistles to Eliza, yet after her marriage, she sends only three short letters. In Lucy's last letter as Miss Freeman, she encourages women to "espouse their own cause," but after becoming Mrs. Sumner she embodies the dominant culture's voice, insisting that Eliza's ideas about freedom are misguided when she writes: "Freedom ... is a play about words" (31). It is, and Foster exposes how, for women, democracy has been little more than such a play. Foster satirizes Lucy's duplicity first through her ironic maiden name, *Freeman*, which reflects the nature of freedom in America at the time. While Eliza is admonished for questioning the merits of marriage, Lucy's actions reveal that Eliza is right.

Eliza's Self-Determination

Earlier I referenced Foster's allusion to Eliza's "education and nature," but what is Eliza's "nature"? I believe it is her desire for self-determination. As the republican chorus attempts to educate Eliza in the ways of patriarchy, she continues to resist the system. When Lucy, Mrs. Richman, Mrs. Wharton and Julia Granby voice opinions about a woman's place, their rhetoric echoes that of the new republic, which believed that the majority of Americans could not act in their own best interests. Because Eliza's acculturation comes through women, she sinks into an intellectual abyss in which she chokes on patriarchal rhetoric. Gareth Evans writes that "the seduced woman in early American novels cannot play the role her culture ascribes her because she either fails to follow the path laid out by the republican father or because she fails to see the virtues of the republican husband." Foster casts a wider net distributing blame for Eliza's fall. When Eliza realizes that she will lose her battle against the dominant ideology, she abandons writing and intellectual pursuits, recognizing that there is no place for her voice. Sharon Harris argues, "in many ways, the novel's structure is the unfolding of Eliza's growing awareness of this social truth" (5).

In Eliza's defense, neither suitor is completely attractive. Boyer's discourse is rational and boring, while Sanford's is disrespectful and entertaining. Significantly, Boyer values his epistolary correspondence with Eliza while Sanford writes her only once – "a despairing letter" to dissuade her from marrying Boyer. In fact, after Boyer rejects her, Sanford leaves for over a year, and Eliza conveys to Lucy that, "more than twelve months have lapsed, and I have not received a line from Major Sanford in all that time" (100).

Neither Eliza nor the reader should be surprised by Sanford's lack of correspondence. While Boyer's epistolary correspondence suits his pedantic personality, it also reflects upon his upbringing and education. Eliza writes to Lucy after meeting Boyer that "he was descended from a worthy family; has passed with honor and applause through the university where he as educated; had since studied divinity with success" (8). On the other hand, Sanford's lax education is an excuse for his deficient morals, as Eliza reflects: "Perhaps a gay disposition, and a lax education may have betrayed him into some scenes of dissipation" (53). Sanford holds no regard for education, women, or religion, and betrays his intellectual deficiencies in such statements as, "I have heard a quotation from a certain book; but what book it was I have forgotten, if I ever knew. No matter for that; the quotation is, that 'stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.' I like it hugely, as Tristram Shandy's father said of Yorick's sermon" (139). The "book" he cannot place is the Bible.

Eliza's friends cannot understand her interest in Sanford. At one point, Eliza writes to Lucy that "there is something extremely engaging and soothing too, in virtuous and refined conversation" (66). Such comments lead Julia to ask Eliza: "How can you be pleased and entertained by his conversation? To me it appears totally repugnant" (129). Selby offers his opinion on this topic in an earlier letter to Boyer, claiming that he is "a convert to Pope's assertion, that 'Every woman is, at heart, a rake.' ...How else shall we account for the existence of this disposition, in your favorite fair? It cannot be the result

of her education” (53). In contrast, Eliza’s intelligence and education make her the worst kind of “fallen woman.”⁹

While the reader’s impulse is to vilify Sanford, Foster makes it clear that Eliza is not innocent. Eliza knows that she should extricate herself from Sanford, and in a letter to Lucy, she includes the following lines from Samuel Garth’s translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: “I see the right, and I approve it too/Condemn the wrong, and yet the wrong pursue” (88). Eliza is too savvy not to see through flattery. She is an active agent, and while she still hopes to enjoy her freedom, she realizes that she has become a pariah. She asks Lucy, “how can I rise superior to ‘The world’s dread laugh, which scarce the firm philosopher can scorn,’” ironically quoting from Boyer’s favorite poet, James Thomson’s, “Autumn” (99).

The cause of her shame stems from a crucial episode when Boyer discovers Eliza and Sanford having a tête-à-tête in the Richman's garden. The accounts that Boyer, Eliza, and Sanford give of the incident create an opposition of discourses, enhancing the drama. Eliza expresses to Lucy her humiliation over being rejected by Boyer: “Oh my friend, I am undone! ... Oh that I had not written to Mr. Boyer! ...I have given him the power of triumphing in my distress” (105). Eliza is confessing her deep humiliation and regret, and Lucy’s inappropriate response is: “Your truly romantic letter came safe to hand. Indeed, my dear, it would make a very pretty figure in a novel. A bleeding heart, slighted

⁹ It makes sense that a young, “uneducated” woman like Mrs. Richman’s neighbor, Miss Laurence, would be attracted to Sanford whom she mistakenly believes is a wealthy gentleman, because as Mrs. Richman writes: “nature has not been very bountiful, either to her body, or mind. Her parents have been shamefully deficient in her education” (98).

love, and all the et ceteras of romance...!” (105). Novels themselves are a counter-discourse that recall the accusations attributing Elizabeth Whitman’s coquetry to romance reading. Until this moment Eliza believes that she can choose between duty and desire. In her letter to Boyer asking him to renew his suit, she writes: “Pope very justly observes, ‘that every year is a critic on the last.’ The truth of this observation is fully exemplified in my years!” (101). Eliza finally grasps the gravity of her mistake. With her reputation compromised, Eliza is doomed, even before she is seduced.

Eliza’s depression deepens, and Lucy’s outrage over a Boston production of *Romeo and Juliet* echoes her disapproval of Eliza’s “indulgence of melancholy.” Lucy’s tirade about dramatic excess is a veiled political statement about sympathy, recalling another criticism of tragic drama in *Clarissa*: “Yet, for my own part, I loved not tragedies; though she did, for the sake of the instruction.” This is not the only reference to *Clarissa* in *The Coquette*. In an early letter to Lucy, Eliza relays a warning by Mrs. Richman: “I do not think you are seducible; nor was Richardson’s *Clarissa*, till she made herself the victim.” (38). Eliza would be familiar with *Clarissa*’s fate, as well as the patterns of tragic literature. In fact, after being rejected by Boyer, in a letter to Lucy she quotes from Joseph Addison’s *Tragedy of Oedipus* (1711): “To you, great Gods, I make my last appeal;/ O, clear my conscience, or my crimes reveal! ...Impute my Errors to your own Decree:/ My Hands are guilty, but my Heart is free” (109). Eliza has ignored the warnings, and in this same letter she asks Lucy to “Send me some new books; not such, however, as will require much attention. Let them be plays or novels” (109). Light reading may amuse, but her life is reading like a tragedy, and Eliza laments, “I hope the

tragic comedy, in which I have acted so conspicuous a part, will come to a happy end” (120). Eliza knows better - tragedy is actually tragic.

Reading to Death

Eliza has ignored sage advice throughout her relationship with Sanford, and when Julia returns from visiting Lucy in Boston, she finds Eliza retreating into silence. Lucy’s written response to this news is: “Avoid solitude.... Your once favorite amusements court your attention...I have contributed my mite, by sending you a few books; such as you requested. They are of the lighter kind of reading; yet perfectly chaste” (112). While Lucy’s “chaste” literature seems ironic, it helps Eliza who responds: “Your kind letter...assisted me in regulating my sensibility” (114). This seems to mark a turning point for Eliza – a return (perhaps in defeat) to her circle of women, until she reports in her next letter to Lucy: “My mamma, Miss Granby, and myself, were sitting together in the chamber. Miss Granby was entertaining us by reading aloud in Millot’s elements of history, when a servant rapped at the door, and handed in the following billet” which is a plea from Sanford (117). Eliza is just beginning to recover her sense of self, and although she does not want to see Sanford, her mother does not turn him away, and Julia advises, “I see no harm in conversing with him” (117). Eliza is essentially expelled from the domestic reading circle, and the value of domestic reading is trumped by a seducer’s note. Why do the women act as they do?

Lucy sets the pattern for the women who voice the duplicitous social traditions of patriarchy - this domestic reading scene is an example. As Eliza's mental state

deteriorates, so does Lucy's friendship. Lucy must focus on her husband so she sends Julia Granby in her stead, who pleads to Lucy: "Pray madam, write her often. Your letters may do much for her" (110). But the limits of Lucy's sympathy become painfully clear when she insists that Julia remain with her in Boston. Eliza was right - marriage has become the "tomb of friendship." Her withdrawal commences, and she writes to Lucy: "You must excuse me if my letters are shorter than formerly. Writing is not so agreeable to me as it used to be" (127).

Eliza indicts her female friends for their role in her seduction: "I had no one to participate in my cares, to witness my distress, and to alleviate my sorrows, but him" (145). Eliza's most treasured relationships are her female friendships and the emotional understanding that such relationships provide, but in Federalist America women cannot operate independently of patriarchal culture. Pettengill cites the inequalities that women suffered under republican ideology, and notes how Eliza resents the "inadequacies of both sisterhood and republican motherhood, which have promised so much but delivered so little" (197). Julia Stern, however, argues that the female community is acculturated to patriarchal values, and it is precisely because middle class women were excluded from politics and business that they focused on homosocial friendship. In *The Coquette*, Foster offers "equalitarian friendship" as an alternative to marriage, and although this alternative does not sustain Eliza, her failure is instructive.

There is a change in the tone of letters after we learn that Eliza and Sanford have consummated their relationship. Letters become typical seduction rhetoric, culminating in the warning: "May my unhappy story serve as a beacon to warn the American fair"

(159). The change in tone is evident in Eliza's letter relaying the news of the Richman's infant daughter's death, in which we read Foster's lament about the limits of women's creativity as Eliza describes letter writing as "an employment, which suits me not at present." (134). For Eliza, writing to a hostile audience has no appeal. In this letter, Eliza mourns for Harriot, herself, and her unborn child, none of whom survive Federalist society. As she frequently does, Eliza punctuates this letter with lines of poetry, in this case from "Solomon: Or the Vanity of the World" by the English poet Matthew Prior: "Happy the babe, who, privleg'd by fate,/ The shorter labors, and a lighter weight, / Receiv'd but yesterday the gift of breath;/Order'd to morrow, to return to death" (134). The depths of Eliza's despair are also reflected in her lack of interest in reading, as she conveys to Julia: "when I have recourse to books, if I read those of serious description, they remind me of an awful futurity, for which I am unprepared; if history, it discloses facts in which I have no interest; If novels, they exhibit scenes of pleasure which I have no prospect of realizing!" (135). Stern believes that as Eliza slips into silence, Foster is commenting how "All acts of female invention – writing and childbearing – would seem to lead from a delusive pleasure to silence, loss, and death" (136). Eliza finally learns that her fate is silence.

Shortly after the mournful Harriot letter, Eliza's first confession appears in a letter from Julia to Lucy, as Julia reports Eliza's lament: "You have discovered a secret which harrows up my very soul! ... Yes! It was Major Sanford...who has triumphed in my destruction!" (142). Julia observes, "with her natural and acquired abilities, with her advantages of education,...I was surprised at her becoming the prey of an insidious

libertine” (145). Foster makes it perfectly clear that educated women have no excuse for falling prey to a rake: “Whatever allowance may be made for those, whose ignorance occasions their ruin, no excuse can be offered for others whose education, and opportunities for knowing the world and themselves, have taught them a better lesson”(qtd. in Newton 155) . Eliza is the worst kind of fallen woman because she is so well educated. Eliza quotes the following lines to Julia: “Death is the privilege of human nature ,/ And life without it were not worth our taking:/Thither the poor, the pris'ner, and the mourner / Fly for relief, and lay the burthens down,” from Nicholas Rowe’s’s *The Fair Penitent* (1703) which features the notorious rake, Lothario (150). The inclusion of this poem insinuates that Eliza does wish to repent, which she confirms in her final letter, writing: “Should it please God to spare and restore me to health, I shall return, and endeavour, by a life of penitence and rectitude, to expiate my past offences” (156). But Eliza is not so naïve.

The Fallen Woman as Emblem

The community answers Eliza’s pleas for sympathy only after her death. Stern notes how in her journey “from outspokenness to silence to immobility and dissolution, the heroine regains her appeal to her women friends as she moves toward the monumentality of an emblem” (143). Ironically, the formerly outspoken writer again becomes audible in death, as remnants of her writing surface: “Mr. Wharton has brought back several scraps of her writing, containing miscellaneous reflections on her situation, the death of her babe, and the absence of her friends” (162). Eliza’s recovered writings

enable the chorus to reinvent her by manipulating her words, reminiscent of those strangers who attempted to impose their own reading of Elizabeth Whitman via her tombstone, which the novel reproduces as:

In Memory Of
ELIZA WHARTON,
Is inscribed by her weeping friends,
to whom she Endeared herself by uncommon tenderness and affection.
Endowed with superior acquirements,
she was Still more distinguished by humility and benevolence.
Let candour throw a veil over her frailties,
For great was her charity to others.
She sustained The last painful scene, far from every friend;
and exhibited An example of calm resignation.
Her departure was on the 25th day of July, AD ----
in the 37th year of her age.
And the tears of strangers watered her grave.

This inscription emphasizes not her “crime,” but “benevolence,” noting not her intelligence, but her “frailties.” The chorus rewrites Eliza/Elizabeth’s story as a cautionary tale, a political maneuver that diminishes her life. This is also the point when the reader learns Eliza’s age, and sympathy turns toward pity because Eliza has been so misunderstood. It makes sense that Eliza’s final destination is Salem, the symbolic location of persecution. By sacrificing Eliza, Foster condemns a society that fails to teach women its harsh, sociopolitical truths.

Cathy Davidson notes that *The Coquette* is “ultimately about silence, subservience, and stasis in contradistinction to conflicting impulses toward self-expression, independence, and action” (Introduction xix). American writers negotiated these impulses, and offered opinions on political culture and woman’s status in many

works of nineteenth century fiction. As Barbara Bardes argues: “These novelists did not merely reflect public attitudes, but, through their acceptance of the dominant tenets of the political culture or by mounting a challenge to those values, participated in the battle over women’s access to power” (4). Critics generally agree that through Eliza's demise, and through the act of writing a novel, Foster indicts the culture that prevents women from playing a public role. By reimagining the Elizabeth Whitman story, Foster also comments on the role of fiction in the early republic. Perhaps fiction is the most powerful way to communicate sociopolitical truth.

Is *The Coquette* subversive? Emblematic of the twentieth-century response to Foster’s novel is James Woodress’ dismissal: “Written in the tedious epistolary style of Samuel Richardson’s piously immoral romances, this tale offered a generation of readers a titillating story of seduction and a Sunday-school tract on the wages of sin.” This reading relegates the novel to a cautionary tract, but toward the end of the twentieth century, critics began to argue that its discourse is concerned with sociosexual politics, and that sentimental novels resist the domestic sphere. Sharon Harris argues that Foster uses moral fiction as a guise under which to write a political novel – the only way to accomplish such as feat in a post-Revolutionary society that was deeply suspicious of women. *The Coquette* is a subversive political novel disguised as sentimental fiction, concerned with equality, education, personal freedom, and happiness. While Foster sacrifices Eliza to the dominant ideology, she does so after illustrating how women had been denied the promises of America.

Why Consider *Belinda Against The Coquette*?

In *Strictures on a Modern System of Female Education*, Hannah More's call for women to "come forward and contribute their full and fair proportion towards the saving of their country," and "raise the depressed tone of public morals" implies an opportunity for female agency. Political writers of the 1790s such as Mary Wollstonecraft associated family with nation, and in her 1792 tract, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft asserts that:

A man has been termed a microcosm; and every family might also be called a state...[Morality], polluted in the national reservoir, sends off streams of vice to corrupt the constituent parts of the body politic.... make women rational creatures, and free citizens, and they will quickly become good wives, and mothers. (177-178)

Within such calls for political obligation is embedded another call – to instill women with "reason". Wollstonecraft criticizes sentimental fiction for encouraging women to rely more on sensation than reason.¹⁰ Kate Flint notes that the fictional worlds heroines inhabit are "presented by the novel with a serious aim in view, such as warning the heroine/reader of the folly of eloping, or of not distinguishing carefully between love and passion" (26). Women readers must have the "reason" and acumen to interpret these warnings, and the self-control to heed them.

¹⁰ Forty years earlier, Charlotte Lennox addressed similar concerns in *The Female Quixote* (1752), satirizing the influence of the romantic tradition and concluding with the doctor's dialogue regarding how "The immediate tendency of these books...is to give new fire to the passions of revenge and love: two passions which...it is one of the severest labours of reason and piety to suppress" (420).

While some argued for the educational value of the novel, early novels were still considered unsavory; even dangerous. But by the late eighteenth century, certain novels were considered polite, and Armstrong argues that “this is the time when sexual behavior emerged as a common standard for identifying and evaluating individuals from all reaches of the social world [as well as] the period during which the entire tradition of the novel was being established” (“Desire” 37). Novels certainly commented on social issues, including sexual behavior, and studies suggest that in the late eighteenth century new concerns appeared that “reading may teach politically seditious attitudes...challenging the role of the family and the position of women in relation to authority” (Flint 2).

I chose to consider *The Coquette* and *Belinda* in this chapter because both of these novels comment, through threats to domesticity, on the political health of their respective nations, and how to secure a stronger future. Specifically, these novels comment on the role of women in this plan. Both novels offer ideas about the reformative powers of domestic reading, and how such reading offered women some form of agency by empowering them as overseers of the home and family, charged with raising rational, patriotic future citizens. In *The Coquette*, this power is exercised most clearly by the model republican wife, Mrs. Richman, and in *Belinda*, by the ideal mother, wife, and educator, Mrs. Perceival. However, Mrs. Perceival oversees a healthy, clever brood of children, while the Richman baby dies. If Edgeworth is offering domesticity as the ideal seat of a woman’s political power, Foster is arguing that relegating women to the home stifles the woman, the health of the family, and the future of the Republic.

The fate of Edgeworth's and Foster's heroines offers another competing view about women in their respective nations. Belinda Portman maintains her integrity and reforms her immediate community, suggesting that aristocratic excess must be curbed by responsible female citizens from the lower classes, women who value education, reason, and morals gained through domestic reading. Such women will reform men, raise future leaders, and construct a society purged of fashionable, upper-class vices – lessons learned from the French Revolution. On the other hand, in Foster's American text, Eliza Wharton succumbs to seduction and dies. An intelligent, independent woman can serve no role in a nation that denies its promises to half of its population. Foster suggests that the purpose of domestic reading is to teach women their place according to the dominant rhetoric, however, based on Mrs. Richman's fate, that place holds no future. Just as aristocratic behavior has no role in the new republic, nor does a woman with a voice. That is the failure of America.

If we consider the question: "What kind of women should we raise?" in relation to these two novels, the answers vary. Edgeworth's novel offers hope and a purpose for women who regulate themselves, their desires, their reading, and carry those values into their home, and by extension into society at large. Foster's bleak vision suggests that for a woman to survive she must accept her subordinate status – any hope of personal freedom will result in ruin, and the Richman baby's death suggests that girls are doomed from the start. Her cautionary tale is not only a "warning" to young women; it is a scathing, social critique about the self-defeating American political system and its cost to republican women. Through the lens of reading, Foster and Edgeworth comment on

women's education, the role of the family, and sociopolitical ideology in late eighteenth century England and America.

This line of commentary continues in Chapter Three which considers heroines and their reading practices in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* and Catharine Maria Sedgwick's historical fiction, *Hope Leslie*. In these novels, written approximately twenty years after *Belinda* and *The Coquette*, England and America are still suffering from pressing social and political issues, as well as from both internal and external threats to national security, and in both texts, patriarchal authority is failing. Like Edgeworth and Foster, Austen and Sedgwick comment on national and cultural issues through the activities and influence of women readers.

In *Mansfield Park*, like Belinda Portman before her, Fanny Price's responsible reading and moral fortitude enable her to regulate the behavior of others in the service of common sense and social stability, and like Belinda, Fanny's social position suggests that upper-class vices must be cured by domestic readers from the lower classes. The continuity of England's issues makes a consideration of *Mansfield Park* intriguing, as threats of social unrest stemming from the French Revolution, Napoleonic Wars and other conflicts continue to threaten England. That the same solution continues to be offered fifteen years after *Belinda* is fascinating, and lends credibility to the belief in women's reasoning skills and political value, as well as to the value of good reading.

Unlike Eliza Wharton who succumbs to seduction and dies, Sedgwick's American heroine, Hope Leslie, enjoys a more conventional ending. But like Eliza, Hope is a free spirit who cannot always interpret human behavior because she is motivated by her

uniquely American ideas about rights and freedoms, even when those freedoms do not extend to her. It is through Hope's Native American double, Magawisca that Sedgwick suggests an intelligent, independent woman can have no voice in a nation that disenfranchises certain members. Sedgwick seems to agree with Foster's position that domestic (in Sedgwick's case – religious) reading keeps women imprisoned in the home, and in fact, the last words in *Hope Leslie* belong to Esther Downing, a spinster who returns to England, suggesting Sedgwick's disdain for the ideals of the "cult of true womanhood" and its future in America. But *Hope Leslie* has a brighter message than *The Coquette*, as Hope's extensive reading positions her as a free thinker who, with her progressive husband, will work toward a more modern society. Beyond the English novels which present domestic women as stabilizing influences, the American novels begin to offer the hope that intelligent, well read women can have a political voice that destabilizes intolerant ideologies, and can serve an active role in their developing nation.

CHAPTER III
TAKING A STAND: JANE AUSTEN'S *MANSFIELD PARK* AND
CATHARINE MARIA SEDGWICK'S *HOPE LESLIE*

To consider to question: "What kind of girls should we raise?" in relation to these two novels, it makes sense investigate their respective heroine's social role and areas of influence. To who are they exposed, and how does reading position them to exert influence? In Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), written for Regency period readers, social and political action must be guided by critical readers to "stabilize" the nation, while in Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* (1827), right reading creates critical thinkers who will forge a new, more tolerant America by "destabilizing" its old-world political model.

Mansfield Park represents England as rural, leisured, and cultivated but with social and imperial responsibilities -- a "field" for the influence of the "manse" through faith, good deeds, and leadership. The manse is presided over by a woman, perpetuating the ideology of domestic woman as nurturer of the nation. Fanny Price comes to Mansfield Park from Portsmouth able to read and write, and under the good influence of her cousin, Edmund Bertram, she furthers her education in contrast to her frivolous, aristocratic cousins. Fanny's establishment as the novel's moral center and her happy ending make a point about who thinks and who acts. Without the thinkers, those who lack moral guidance fail. At the end of the novel, Edmund and Fanny are united and are

expected to guide their immediate community and by extension, the nation, from the solid foundation of their home.

In contrast, *Hope Leslie* is a rereading of history that questions America's frontier myth and considers ideas such as the political engagement of women and social justice. Hope has been given a traditional, classical education by her hapless tutor, and while she is also versed in romance novels and poetry, she possesses critical thinking skills. When the devout Puritan maiden, Esther Downing refuses to aid the Native American heroine, Magawisca, in accordance with her "slavish" obedience to scriptural authority, Hope's critical reading enables her to justify and devise a plot to free her Native American double. In *Hope*, Sedgwick creates the ideal American citizen - a proactive, progressive, educated individual who privileges individual conscience above the dominant ideology when that ideology proves itself unjust.

Both *Mansfield Park* and *Hope Leslie* tackle national issues such as land ownership and slavery, and in both texts, patriarchal authority is failing. Nancy Armstrong points out how Austen's novels "strive to empower a new class of people – not powerful people, but normal people – whose ability to interpret human behavior qualifies them to regulate the conduct of daily life and reproduce their form of individuality in and through writing" (136). I agree, and would also include "reading" in Armstrong's statement. *Mansfield Park* and *Hope Leslie* feature educated heroines whose actions reflect their value as critical thinkers in an Old World, patriarchal society that limits their influence. These heroines must find alternative methods to exercise influence in their families, communities, and nation. Fanny Price and Hope Leslie voice their

beliefs guided by knowledge gained through reading, but Fanny's influence is through example, while Hope's influence is through action.

Who is Fanny Price?

Jane Austen's vision for social and political stability is entrenched in her upbringing as an unmarried daughter from the professional middle class. She was well versed in the "literature of the day" that condemned courtly decadence and upper-class values, and understood the novel's potential for social criticism at a time when many critics condemned novels as dangerous (especially for women).¹ The novel was a valuable tool during the "Revolution Debate" of the 1790s as writers such as Austen began to focus on the reconciliation of social differences that threatened Britain during the Regency era.

Formally, the Regency period in the United Kingdom is the period between 1811, when King George III was deemed unfit to rule and his son the was installed as Prince Regent, and 1820 when George IV became King. "The Regency era" refers to a longer time frame between 1795 and 1837, and is noted for trends in architecture, writing, fashion, and culture, as well as by aristocratic excess such as the Brighton Pavilion project. It was also a period of uncertainty caused by factors such as the Napoleonic wars,

¹ In *Northanger Abbey* (1817), Austen satirizes a naive reader of Gothic romances, linking critical reading to critical thought, and solving national issues at the local level. *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), represents the situation of genteel women deprived of a living, a situation that Mary Wollstonecraft argued damaged society in general. *Emma* highlights the destabilizing danger of a genteel woman who lacks knowledge and misuses her social power. In *Emma*, Austen denies that extensive reform is necessary to heal the nation, positing that individual reform can effect change. With *Persuasion*, Austen returns to the socially ignored heroine, and addresses the problem underlying *Mansfield Park*, that of reconstructing Britain in the wake of Revolution.

the War of 1812, riots, and anxiety that the British people might be inspired by the French Revolution. The class system in England during the Regency era was upheld by the land owners, but the industrial age was ushering in dramatic economic and social changes, widening the gap between the rich and the poor while at the same time producing a new middle-class. However, hierarchy remained intact and people knew how to address their social “superiors”. Fanny Price’s social status complicates this model, and through her liminality Austen comments on Britain’s troubled aristocracy, the sinking lower class, and how moral, intelligent people can help Britain find a balance between the two extremes.

Mansfield Park’s heroine is right-thinking but socially invisible. Fanny Price is from an impoverished family in Portsmouth. Her mother is one of three former beauties whose two sisters married above her. One sister, Mrs. Norris, married a clergyman and the other, Lady Bertram, married Sir Thomas Bertram of Mansfield Park. The widowed Mrs. Norris persuades Sir Thomas to bring Fanny to Mansfield where she is mocked by her cousins Tom, Maria, and Julia, but defended by her cousin Edmund.

Sir Thomas rules his estate, and when he travels to visit his interests in Antigua, the family goes astray. Maria becomes engaged to Mr. Rushworth, and the Bertrams become enchanted by Henry and Mary Crawford, a fashionable brother and sister. When the young people visit Rushworth's estate, the Bertram sisters flirt with Henry, and Edmund becomes fascinated by Mary. Fanny is a suffering spectator. Later, when Tom Bertram brings his vacuous friend, Yates, to Mansfield, the cousins stage *Lovers' Vows*, a translation of August von Kotzebue’s *Das Kind der Liebe* (1791, *The Love Child*). The

play is a dangerous choice, and Fanny declines to participate. Sir Thomas's sudden return ends these follies.

At this point Fanny begins to be noticed, especially by Henry Crawford who falls in love with her and persuades his uncle, an admiral, to advance her brother's naval career. When Henry (who Fanny recognizes as a seducer) proposes to Fanny she rejects him, enraging Sir Thomas who sends her home to Portsmouth. With Fanny in Portsmouth the Bertrams fall apart. Tom falls ill and Mary expresses her hope that his death will leave Edmund heir to Mansfield Park. Maria runs off with Henry and Julia elopes with Yates. Mary's inability to see Maria and Henry's adultery as morally serious appalls Edmund. When Fanny returns to Mansfield, her steadiness and moral fortitude make her a woman of "price," of value. Fanny marries Edmund, and together they will maintain Mansfield Park and spread their virtues to the manse and beyond. In *Mansfield Park* the estate (and state) is purged of courtly elements, and revitalized by those with merit from a lower class.

Good Readers vs. Bad Readers

Because of the great value Austen placed on literary knowledge, it is not surprising that there is a great deal of reading and writing in *Mansfield Park* in the form of books, letters, notes, and scripts. Some characters are more involved in reading than others, begging the question: what is Austen's point? For example, Henry Crawford is a good reader and actor, but does Henry possess good character? Perhaps the answer is whether one reads with their heart or their head. I posit that the future clergyman,

Edmund Bertram, and his timid, vulnerable cousin Fanny are of “good” character because they read from the heart, and are rewarded with marriage. In *Mansfield Park*, Austen uses reading and writing to judge the novel’s characters and orchestrate the appropriate ending.

While I argue that literary skills are critical to understanding *Mansfield Park*’s conclusion, most critics have focused on either *Lover’s Vows*, or why Fanny Price is a difficult heroine to love. I will address *Lover’s Vows* later, but first, it is critical to understand why shy, frail Fanny is the way she is to appreciate her as a heroine. The free indirect narrative invites a sharp look at character, specifically at the psychology of Fanny’s jealousy and anxiety. Fanny is initially a shy, anxious character, and with Mary’s arrival, a jealous character – not the usual traits of an Austen heroine. But thrown into an environment with her wealthy, educated cousins, is it surprising that she is jealous? And when Mrs. Norris accuses her of ingratitude, is it surprising she feels guilty? And in the presence of her domineering uncle, is her anxiety unfounded? In addition, Fanny must counsel both the man she loves and her urbane rival. In this perfect storm of insecurity and angst, we must consider how Fanny’s secret love for Edmund instigates much of her conduct, complicating her as a paragon of integrity. For example, when Tom Bertram falls ill, Fanny declines Mary’s offer to return her to Mansfield because although she is desperate to leave her family’s squalid home in Portsmouth, she does not want to bring Mary into contact with Edmund. Additionally, when she receives Edmund’s letter with the news that Maria has committed adultery, Fanny’s finds herself “in the greatest danger of being exquisitely happy” because she is going to Mansfield (Austen 441). Nina

Auerbach has even called Fanny a “Romantic monster,” observing that “like Frankenstein and his monster, those spirits of solitude, Fanny is a killjoy, a blighter of ceremonies and divider of families” (211). Fanny is a complicated heroine, and Austen challenges the reader to read Fanny correctly.

One way to consider Fanny’s interior virtues is through her literary skills. While the narrative qualities of *Mansfield Park* differ from other Austen novels, it shares with those novels a heavy emphasis on reading. From *Northanger Abbey* through *Sandition*, Austen uses a character’s taste in books to offer insight into her values. Gary Kelly argues that “Reading is used by Austen as a paradigm for the process of perception and judgment; it may also be instrumental in the plot of the novel” (29). For example, in *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility*, Catherine Morland and Marianne Dashwood misjudge others because they have read the wrong books or read incorrectly. In *Pride and Prejudice* the focus shifts to letters, and the novel’s pivotal turn occurs when Elizabeth reads Darcy’s letter and realizes that she has misjudged almost everyone, including herself, admitting: “Till this moment, I never knew myself” (Austen 156). Reading books and letters, and reading them well, is the product of education. One of Edmund’s first acts of kindness when Fanny arrives at *Mansfield Park* is to “furnish [Fanny] with paper and every other material” to write to William, an early clue about the importance of reading and writing (Austen 46). In fact, because Fanny is William’s faithful correspondent, his “direct holidays might with justice be instantly given to [Fanny]” (Austen 245). William’s love is Fanny’s dearest treasure, and even when she is

very young, Fanny understands the value of reading and writing. Ironically, most of the Bertrams think Fanny is stupid because she prefers these solitary acts to social pleasures. This distinction is important because education determines who will be a good reader, a good writer, and a moral person in *Mansfield Park*. Fanny arrives from Portsmouth able to read and write, but that is the extent of her education. Fanny's own mother describes her as "somewhat delicate and puny," and she has obviously been neglected. Her mother admits: "Her daughters had never been much to her" (Austen 11, 391). As a result, Fanny lacks size, strength and confidence, making her look and feel inferior to her robust Mansfield cousins. Her outsider status is clear when Sir Thomas assures Mrs. Norris that Fanny and his children "cannot be equals. Their rank, fortune, rights and expectations, will always be different" (Austen 42).

The girls are indeed treated differently, and when Edmund undertakes management of Fanny's education they focus on reading, ensuring that they share literary tastes and ultimately rendering them ideal partners. Edmund discerns Fanny's intellect: "He knew her to be clever, to have a quick apprehension as well as good sense, and a fondness for reading, which, properly directed, must be an education in itself" (Austen 52). And while the governess, Miss Lee, taught French and History, Edmund "recommended the books which charmed her leisure hours, he encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment; he made reading useful by talking to her of what she read" (Austen 52). Catherine Golden points out that by guiding Fanny's reading, Edmund ensures that she acquires the education and social codes that will allow her to operate in

his social circle, and “true to Greek legend, Edmund falls in love with his own creation” (122).

Aside from Edmund’s tutoring, much of Fanny’s knowledge is self-taught or gleaned from observation, yet she develops more useful knowledge in her limited experience than more advantaged characters procure in their larger world. Maria and Julia Bertram make poor and destructive life choices. At Fanny’s coming-out ball, Mrs. Norris incorrectly credits life at Mansfield for Fanny’s beauty, just as Sir Thomas congratulates himself for creating Fanny due to the “education and manners she owed to him” (Austen 285). They err because Fanny’s goodness and education are complementary, while the “promising talents and early information” of Maria and Julia do not serve them because they lack guidance. Austen anticipates a later article in the *Westminster Review* titled “The Higher Education of Women,” (1888) which concludes that the well-read, educated woman will elevate herself and the race “by giving us mothers whose cerebral development will be such that their children will be more easily taught, and capable of much more than the children of less able mothers’ who succumb to neurasthenia out of ennui” (qtd. in Golden 28). In Lady Bertram’s stead, Mrs. Norris fails as badly as her sisters at mothering, provoking Sir Thomas’ regret about the damage of their “anxious and expensive education” (459). The witty, colorful Crawfords have also been guided by substandard role models, and as a result lack strong, moral character.

Fanny reads for education and pleasure, amasses a selection of books in her rooms, and subscribes to a circulating library in Portsmouth to direct her sister Susan’s education. Fanny is the flagship character of moral worth whose interest in reading

personifies the benefits of good literary taste. Ironically, Fanny outstrips her mentor in her ability to correctly read people and situations, as is clear from her personal conduct and ability to determine genuineness in others. When Fanny returns to the chaos of Portsmouth, she teaches her siblings because she knows that “education creates good principles, good principles appear in conduct, right conduct promotes harmonious social bonds, and social bonds make up a Christian nation” (Harris 165). If Fanny is a naturally gifted person who has been improved by education, then Susan might also be saved.

Fanny has become a skilled and critical reader of books and consequently, of character. She is the novel’s ideal reader, and we are told that “from the first hour of her commanding a shilling” she has collected books, which are among her few personal possessions that create a “nest of comforts” in her fireless room (Austen 170). But Fanny doesn’t collect just any books, and Susan Greenfield notes that “given Fanny’s moral strictness, it is hardly surprising that her collection consists of socially sanctioned texts, for like any good young lady she knows what words to avoid: her favorite genres are biography and poetry” (308). Despite the popularity of novels at the end of the eighteenth century, unlike several of Austen’s more colorful heroines, Fanny does not read them. In fact, she reads conduct books which alerted women readers to the moral and sexual dangers of novels. Fanny exemplifies the qualities of ideal womanhood found in conduct books, and is noted at the end of the novel for her “mental superiority” (Austen 466). Unfortunately, while Fanny correctly reads much of the activity in *Mansfield Park*, she cannot always read herself. Fanny learns that she can assume some control through

conduct book virtue, but she continues to uphold its strictest tenets often to her disadvantage.

Refusing to Act: Fanny Takes No *Lover's Vows*

Ironically, it is not Fanny's book reading that establishes her literary authority – it is her reaction to Elizabeth Inchbald's play, *Lover's Vows*. When Tom Bertram decides to stage the play at Mansfield Park, he responds to Edmund's protests that he "can conceive no great harm or danger to any of us in conversing in the elegant written language of some respectable author" (Austen 147). However, the play implicates the participants as bad readers because they cannot critically read the content of the play, and thus fail to see the harm in it. Novels of the period were vilified for encouraging inappropriate conduct, and Fanny objects to the play because its female characters encounter romantic entanglements "unfit to be expressed by any woman of modesty" (Austen 158). Fanny and Sir Thomas react to the play as they would a scandalous novel. This point is salient because Inchbald was both a popular novelist as well as a playwright. In the end, Fanny's judgment is correct, but unfortunately, as Kelly argues, "Fanny's particular anguish is to have true judgment (the appropriate analogue in Austen's novels to cultivate competence as a reader) but to be unable to act on or even utter it" (32).

Despite her aversion to the play's content, Fanny devours the script "with an eagerness which was suspended only by intervals of astonishment, that it could be proposed and accepted in a private Theatre!" (Austen 158). In fact, Fanny memorizes the text so well that she assists in the rehearsals. She is attracted to the plot which mirrors her

own situation. In the play, Anhalt, a tutor, is several years older than his student, Amelia, a girl of seventeen. Amelia loves Anhalt, but he is oblivious to her desire. John Wiltshire notes that poor Fanny is “not only compelled to be present whilst Mary, under cover of the play, courts Edmund, she is forced to witness her unwitting rival act out her own forbidden secret” (75).

When Sir Thomas’s return from the West Indies creates “absolute horror” and puts a stop to the ill-fated play, the novel begins to focus more on Fanny, the only vocal dissenter against its production (Austen 193). At this point, Mary confides in Fanny about her feelings for Edmund, Edmund and Sir Thomas treat Fanny with greater respect, and Henry decides she is worthy of attention. Key moments are now seen through Fanny’s consciousness, as she “first reads and judges a situation, and then, as the plot develops, it confirms her perception” (Greenfield 307). Even her marriage to Edmund is a product of her privileged reading, because although she does not expect it, her marriage is possible because of her wisdom.

Fanny’s literary skills are best highlighted when held up against other characters, most importantly Edmund, who is educated at Eton and Oxford, is a prolific reader, and is destined for the clergy where he will be a public reader and speaker. Wiltshire notes that “to Edmund, who is a replacement for William (himself, of course, a replacement for the mother) Fanny forms what John Bowlby calls an ‘anxious attachment,’” because she fears that Edmund will abandon her (65). Her fears are justified when Edmund explains his changed position about acting, revealing his willingness to rationalize versus her refusal to compromise her values. However, Fanny agrees to help Edmund and Mary

rehearse until she witnesses their connection and becomes so agitated that she cannot continue. Without Fanny's prompting, Edmund is unable to rehearse, indicating that Fanny's presence is integral to his general success. Edmund cares about Fanny, but his confessions about Mary highlight his insensitivity and create a roadblock to a future with Fanny. Unlike Fanny, Edmund cannot correctly read others.

Fanny's rival, Mary Crawford is not a good reader. Mary's pleasure in *Lover's Vows* contrasts sharply with Fanny's awareness that it is inappropriate, but Mary is established as a poorly educated reader prior to the play. At Rushworth's estate, Mary expresses her opinion that a clergyman is nothing more than a public reader who should have enough common sense not to waste time composing sermons. In addition to this insensitivity, her references to Blair reveal the ignorance beneath her shallow wit, "for Blair was much better known in the eighteenth century as the popularizer of the ethical school of rhetoric of Cicero, Quintillian, and Adam Smith than as the author of sermons" (Kelly 38). But Edmund is enchanted and claims "the influence of [Mary's] former companions makes her seem, gives to her conversation, to her professed opinions, sometimes a tinge of wrong...that uncle and aunt! They have injured the finest mind!" (Austen 278). But Fanny discerns Mary's contempt for Edmund's calling, and realizes that Mary does not share his qualities.

Like his sister, Henry Crawford is a facile conversationalist and an adept actor. He is, in fact, the best actor, and Harris refers to him as "a Satanic shape-changer both on and off the stage" (Austen 153). While acting is exhilarating for the Crawfords and difficult for Edmund, it is physically and morally impossible for Fanny. It is, as John

Hardy points out, “as if the ability to enter so readily into a variety of parts and emotions were the sign of a character not sufficiently grounded in itself” that makes acting distasteful (77). Henry’s nature is revealed one evening when the discussion turns to Shakespeare and he asserts: “Shakespeare one gets acquainted with without knowing it” (Austen 342). The Crawfords’ ability to perform a text without understanding it and their lack of knowledge about literature reveal their mental and moral vacuousness. When the subject turns to public reading, Edmund admits: “Even in my profession...how little the art of reading has been studied: how little a clear manner, and good delivery, have been attended to” (Austen 344). Thus, it is the talkers versus silent Fanny and ill-equipped Edmund; or good reading versus bad reading. Fortunately, Fanny is a skilled reader who knows the difference, and while fascinated by the dramatic, is rescued from temptation by her intelligence and her morals.

Reading Letters and Their Writers

I have established which characters read well to understand their relationship to texts, and also to highlight the importance of epistolary in *Mansfield Park*. To understand the novel’s focus on reading, it is important to establish the letters’ role in the late eighteenth century. Letter writing was so popular that letter writing manuals abounded, suggesting that letters were an appropriate place for female expression. Austen’s heroines follow this model; contemplating letter writing, providing access to their thoughts, and inspiring sympathy. But Austen seldom gives readers access to heroines’ letters, and when we do see letters they usually reveal faults rather than good judgment. Some letters

are written by isolated heroines expressing frustration, but are more often a self-pitying response to separation. This frustration is responsible for the letter's perceived danger as a sexual threat.

Letters can be dangerous sexual substitutes. In epistolary novels, letters are kissed, treasured, and fondled as a substitute for their writer. During the necklace episode, when Fanny returns to her room and sees Edmund writing at her desk, she is overjoyed. The unfinished note written on a scrap of paper is a "treasure beyond all hopes....two lines more prized had never fallen from the pen of the most distinguished author" (Austen 275). Perry notes that "Parents and other guardians of youthful virtue in epistolary novels always knew that the cabinet, the letter-writing desk, was the stronghold of consciousness and sexuality" (134). Fanny is not psychologically damaged by her love for Edmund, but just as she locks his note in her desk, she keeps her love for him locked inside her heart.

Volume three of *Mansfield Park* is unsettling because of its shift into epistolary form, but the letters are critical to the novel's outcome. Epistolary fiction operates on the formula of two people separated by an obstacle, and it is the separation that matters. Wolf notes that "Austen uses isolation, stasis, and a shift to epistolary ways of knowing that cut off possible plots, in an experiment to reach to the core of various characters' personalities" (275). In addition to highlighting the consciences of individual characters, the epistolary mode created a "new kind of heroine – literate, isolated, unhappy – who symbolized in a purer form the dilemmas of the current culture than the heroes of earlier romances and epics" (Perry 166). In *Mansfield Park*, letters bring comfort and

information to Fanny in her cloistered world, but the Crawfords' arrival enlarges her space and she will have to assert herself through reading and responding to letters. Letters will help Fanny stave off Henry, and ultimately expose Mary's faults. When the marginalized Fanny cannot speak, letters speak for her. In *Mansfield Park*, epistolary creates a space for Austen to design the novel's "right" ending.

But letters are not simple, private correspondences – letters are often meant for an audience and are the root of several painful moments. Fanny is said to "live upon letters," which can be a dangerous enterprise, because while letters offer the freedom to discuss private subjects publicly, they expose the writer to the danger of public display (Austen 427). Edmund warns Fanny that a "letter exposes to all the evil of consultation, and where the mind is any thing short of perfect decision, an advisor may, in an unlucky moment, lead it to do what it may afterwards regret" (Austen 422). Fanny suffers great anxiety about writing, and just as she could not act in *Lover's Vows*, she cannot act in her writing. If Fanny is such a good reader, why is she not an equally skilled writer? Because her letters are not calculated efforts designed to affect an audience. Although Fanny is jealous of Mary and anxious about her own feelings for Edmund, she is a genuine person whose lack of artful skill attests to her good character. When Mary writes Fanny a manipulative letter promoting Henry's suit, Fanny's response does implicate her or Mary as false, and she writes: "your note I know means nothing; but I am so unequal to any thing of the sort" (Austen 313). Fanny claims to be incapable of understanding Mary's meaning and labels the letter as "nothing" because the feelings it conveys are insincere.

Fanny holds her ground, asserting herself through acts such as refusing to participate in the ill-fated *Lover's Vows*, and rebelling against Mary, Sir Thomas and Edmund by denying Henry's suit. She knows Henry is a cad, and while he is a skilled reader, his skill exposes his flaws, just as Mary's letters expose her moral deficiencies to Edmund – deficiencies Fanny has rightly read all along. After being banished to Portsmouth, Fanny is saved by Tom's illness and Maria's adultery, and when Edmund's letter arrives with plans to return her to Mansfield, it is the "cordial" she needs (441). At Mansfield, Fanny will cure the family and herself.

Other characters do not fare as well as Fanny. Mary's desire for an audience will ultimately haunt her, as her letters expose her faults. In her letter reporting Maria and Henry's disappearance, Mary naively dismisses the matter as a "moment's etourderie" (Austen 436). Mary is more concerned about the affair's social ramifications than its moral consequences, and her cavalier attitude forces Edmund to acknowledge that Mary lacks "the most valuable knowledge...the knowledge of ourselves and of our duty" (Austen 455). Edmund finally realizes what he has overlooked in the past. While Edmund blames Mary's education and London society for her "corrupted, vitiated mind," Fanny speculates that Mary is the corrupter (453). In volume three, the reader is granted a glimpse into the characters' consciences as they become aware of the adultery, and their responses to this pivotal event shed light on who will thrive. The adultery is the catalyst that reunites the characters. When Fanny is called back to Mansfield Park even Lady Bertram is relieved, as Fanny's steadiness stabilizes the home amidst crisis.

The epistolary narrative in *Mansfield Park* engineers Fanny's vindication for good conduct and self-control. Between letters, Tom hunts, Maria and Henry sin, and Julia elopes. So why show Edmund, Fanny, and Mary's letters? The letters expose the correspondents' opinions of the events they describe, illustrating the importance of good reading and writing and making a point about who thinks and who acts. Without the thinkers, the other characters lack moral guidance and fail. When Mary is isolated from Edmund and Fanny, her judgment fails and her letters expose her flaws. As a result, Edmund marries Fanny, his ideal partner, and they will guide the community with their values. Austen uses reading skills to convince her readers that joining Fanny and Edmund is not arbitrary - that joining the two people of good character is, in fact, the right ending. Fanny Price is an unlikely heroine, but her literary skills explain how she fills that role, making reading essential to a successful conclusion in *Mansfield Park*.

Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *All American Girl: Reading Hope Leslie; or, Early Times in the Massachusetts in Context*

While English domestic novels were recommending a reformed aristocracy and improved class relations, American novelists were focused on issues commensurate with a developing nation. Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* is a distinctly American heroine who uses her education and literary skills to impact her rigid Puritan community by enacting a rational approach to religion and race relations. *Hope Leslie* is American in setting, topic, and context, and like its author, was emblematic of an emerging national literature.

Catharine Maria Sedgwick (1789-1867) was an important figure in establishing a national literature.² Her writing, which includes novels, short stories, children's books, religious tracts, and autobiography addresses issues that remain relevant today, such as nation building, women's roles, marriage, and race relations. In the nineteenth century she was as popular as (if not more so than) Cooper, Irving, Melville, and Poe, making the fact that "she was virtually obliterated from the literary landscape by the modernist critical tradition of the early twentieth century profoundly disturbing to scholars of both American literature and history" (Damon-Bach and Clements xix). Sedgwick remained out-of-print until the feminist interest of the 1980s, but has since been reinstated her into the American literary canon.

Sedgwick's family was one of the most important in Massachusetts. Her mother, Pamela Dwight Sedgwick, was the daughter of a Connecticut "river god." Her father, Theodore Sedgwick was a Federalist and political activist who served as Speaker of the House of Representatives during George Washington's presidency. Although Sedgwick attended schools in New York and Boston, the majority of her education came from her reading and the intellectual interests of her family who supported her lifestyle as a single woman.³

² A November 1842 review of *Hope Leslie* in *Godey's Lady's Book* reported that "The best pens among our female writers, we are happy to notice, are chiefly devoted to national subjects. While the lady writers are thus patriotic, we need not despair of ultimately building up a sound and elegant national literature."

³ Lucinda Damon-Bach and Victoria Clements write in *Declarations of Independence* that "Choosing to remain unmarried in a century in which only one out of ten women did... she was an early advocate of what she considered women's natural rights: the right to a practical and intellectual education, the right to choose whom – and whether – to marry, and the right to work outside the home" (xxi).

Sedgwick published her first novel, *A New-England Tale; or, Sketches of New-England Character and Manners* anonymously in 1822, followed by *Redwood, A Tale* in 1824. Critics mixed praise of *Redwood* with the caveat that domestic fiction is not “real” literature, and when William Cullen Bryant suggested America’s forefathers as a topic, Sedgwick produced *Hope Leslie*, using flaws in America’s Puritan past to highlight how the promise of freedom did not extend to all citizens. Although Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1791) and Hannah Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797) has enjoyed success, Sedgwick rejected the seduction plot to present her heroine with a more contemporary set of social and intellectual challenges. As Mary Kelly writes: “In her fiction, as in her life, Sedgwick registered the social and political debates through which Americans grappled with the freedoms and the anxieties, the rights and the contradictions they had inherited from the Revolution”(xvii).

In the early nineteenth century, when romantic novels were suspect reading for young women, *Hope Leslie*’s basis in historical fact made it acceptable. Nina Baym suggests in *American Women Writers and the Work of History*: “If women’s historical writing frequently advanced political views, it seldom offered a radical revision of the historical narrative it depended on...historical writing involved a sense of opportunity and potential that made it at most reformist, not radical, where its own subject matter was concerned” (1). This is where Sedgwick’s reading of history differs. *Hope Leslie* begins a year after the Pequod war in 1637, and ends in 1644, two years after the beginning of the English Civil War. Ivy Schweitzer points out that “Sedgwick uses the theme of English dissenters’ resistance to monarchial tyranny to mount a fictionalized and anachronistic –

really, allegorical – challenge to the patriarchal authoritarianism of the early Puritan settlement” (167). Sedgwick’s novel posits that America’s challenge is balancing individual rights with the public interest.

In the novel, William Fletcher immigrates to America in pursuit of religious and political freedom. His son, Everell, later explains that the colony’s governors “broke the yoke of royal authority, when they left their native land, and shewed what value they set on liberty” (126). But Sedgwick criticizes the religious authority that hypocritically punished those who claimed liberty of conscience. Hope and Magawisca, the dual heroines, question a polity that excludes them on the basis of gender and race. Barbara Bardes and Suzanne Gosset note that “Despite its historical setting and patriotism, *Hope Leslie* is inherently seditious in meaning, since it sets conscience, innocence, and individual liberty against the needs of the community or state” (30).

Sedgwick’s historical setting addresses issues that were relevant in her time. Early nineteenth century America was experiencing rapid economic growth which strained the social and political culture. Commerce was expanding, cities were growing, western expansion quickened, and society was becoming more diverse. The divide between classes was widening, while political rhetoric continued to falsely claim opportunity for all. The political equality for all white males was also a concern. Observers like James Fenimore Cooper and Tocqueville “called attention to a fundamental dilemma of the Republic: whether increased individual equality is compatible with order in the community” (Bardes and Gosset 32). That is the central issue in *Hope Leslie* which also questions what is real “equality”?

Acting on Conscience

Hope Leslie begins by putting Puritanism in a transatlantic context. In the novel, William Fletcher emigrates from England to the Massachusetts Bay Colony after a religious dispute with his wealthy uncle. Fletcher hoped to marry his cousin Alice but his plans are thwarted, and he marries another woman. After several years in Boston, Fletcher tires of the Puritans' intolerance and moves to the frontier town of Springfield, Massachusetts. The Fletchers are assigned two Indian servants, Oneco and Magawisca, children of Mononotto, the chief of the defeated Pequods. When Fletcher learns that the widowed Alice is in Boston with her daughters, Hope and Faith, he visits, and when Alice dies, Fletcher stays in Boston with Hope and sends Faith to Springfield. In Springfield, Indians led by Mononotto attack the Fletcher home, killing his wife and baby and kidnapping Everell and Faith. When Mononotto plans to sacrifice Everell to avenge his own son's death, Magawisca courageously saves Everell, losing her arm in the process. Everell is released, but Faith remains with the Pequods.⁴

The plot is complicated, turning on an entangled romance plot that involves Everell and three women: Hope Leslie, Magawisca, and the pious Esther Downing. The story is set in the historical context of the violence between English settlers and Algonquian Indians. In the novel, the conflict culminates with Magawisca's eyewitness account—a revisionary history—of the 1637 Pequot War in which Puritan forces annihilated two Native American villages in Connecticut. The Native American revenge

⁴ Her union with Oneco is a rare example of successful miscegenation in the early nineteenth century, when other relationships, like that of Cora Munro and Uncas in *Last of the Mohicans* fail.

sets the plot into motion, leading to Everell's capture, Magawisca's sacrifice, and the captivity of Faith who assimilates and marries Oneco.

Part two of the novel sustains themes of cultural crossing, violence, and captivity. Sedgwick complicates the plot further by introducing the villain Sir Philip Gardiner (based upon a real person in William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*). Gardiner is a Catholic, a rake, and a political conspirator who is accompanied by his "page"—a concubine disguised as a boy. The novel later describes Magawisca's attempt to reunite Hope and Faith, Magawisca's subsequent imprisonment, Hope's plot to free her, the failed kidnapping of Hope, and Gardiner's exposure as a villain. The romance plot is consummated by the betrothal of Hope and Everell, Esther's return to England, and Magawisca's retreat into the forests.

The plot is structured around "borders" between civilization and savagery, between male and female behavior, and between the Old World and the New World. The novel's emphasis on female heroism raises questions about these borders and about the consequences of crossing borders to act upon conscience. Hope's first heroic act (that will result in her first decision to challenge an unjust polity) occurs when she leaves Boston for Springfield. While on a hike, her tutor, Master Cradock, is bitten by a rattlesnake and Hope enlists the help of an Indian woman, Nelema to save him. Nelema succeeds, but is accused of witchcraft and arrested. Outraged, Hope engineers Nelema's escape and as punishment becomes a ward of Governor John Winthrop. Her second challenge to authority occurs when Magawisca is arrested for treason. Everell pleads with Esther for help, but Esther refuses. He then applies to Hope who readily agrees to help

him free Magawisca. Judith Fetterly points out that, “witty, smart, compassionate, gutsy, Hope Leslie is a lover of self and a challenger of arbitrary authority who, while insisting on her physical and intellectual freedom, is willing to take extreme risks for what she believes” (“My Sister” 86). In *Hope*, Sedgwick creates the representative American.

The two heroines, Hope and Magawisca share similar qualities, but must cross social and racial boundaries to be friends. Hope recognizes in Magawisca a spirituality that is like her own, and Magawisca shares Hope’s loyalty and intelligence. Both women are foils to the intolerant Puritans. This is especially evident when Sedgwick reinterprets history through Magawisca’s account of the Pequod massacre. What the Puritans recorded as a victory over savages, Magawisca describes as a slaughter of women and children, and during her trial she denies that whites have authority over her. Carolyn Karcher states that “Critics now universally acknowledge the political dimensions of *Hope Leslie* as a novel that rewrites the history of the Pequod War and engages ongoing debate over Indian Removal” (5), and Susan Harris argues that “*A New England-Tale, Redwood, Clarence, and The Linwoods* can likewise be considered political novels in that they grapple with the questions, ‘What are the limits to legitimate authority? When is it appropriate to defy king, magistrate, father?’” (278).

Informed Defiance: Challenging Authority with Reason

My interest lies in an extension of these politically charged questions. I investigate who, according to Sedgwick, is equipped to defy authority, and why. In *Hope Leslie*, Sedgwick suggests that only rational, literate men and women are equipped to

challenge the established order in the spirit of enlightenment and progress. This is clear from the novel's first pages. In the framing story, Sir William, the royalist uncle of William Fletcher, fears Fletcher's Puritan leanings. He laments that his nephew does not accept "sovereign's laws," and admonishes his education, railing against a system that crams "our lads' heads with philosophy and rhetoric and history of those liberty-loving Greeks and Romans" (Sedgwick 6). In *Hope Leslie*, Sedgwick extends this love of liberty to all citizens, including women and Native Americans.

It is Fletcher who originally sees Magawisca's qualities, and admonishes his more traditional wife, saying, "You surely do not doubt, Martha, that these Indians possess the same faculties that we do. The girl...hath rare gifts of mind" (Sedgwick 20). Everell is of a like mind, and as his mother reports in a letter to her husband, "Everell is an apt scholar; as his master telleth me...He hath taught [Magawisca] to read, and reads to her Spenser's rhymes, and many other books of the kind; of which, I am sorry to say, Dame Grafton hath brought hither stores" (Sedgwick 32). Everell recognizes Magawisca's intelligence and encourages her intellectual development. He is also like Hope in his interest in texts that fall beyond the purview of religious teachings.

Everell considers Magawisca his equal, and as Ivy Schweitzer suggests, "Despite regarding her condition as 'savage' – that is, unconverted and uneducated– Everell recognizes Magawisca as a moral being like himself" (170). Sedgwick sums up their relationship: "He opened the book of knowledge to her – had given subjects to her contemplative mind, beyond mere perceptions of her senses," and "gratified her strong national pride, by admitting the natural equality of all the children of the Great Spirit"

(Sedgwick 276). His sense of equality prepares Everell to accept Magawisca's account of the English attack on her tribe. Magawisca understands Puritan hypocrisy and racism, and questions Everell regarding the murder of her older brother, "You English tell us, Everell, that the book of your law is better than that written on our hearts, for ye say that it teaches mercy, compassion, forgiveness – if ye had such a law and believed it, would ye thus have treated a captive boy?" (Sedgwick 53). Magawisca and Hope must convince Everell that a revision of Puritan ideology is necessary for the project of responsible nation building.

This knowledge is instinctive in the dual heroines who think and act in opposition to the established order. When Hope frees Magawisca from prison after a trial in which Magawisca employs political rhetoric, stating, "I demand of thee death or liberty," both women demonstrate their superiority to the Puritan leadership. Sedgwick, along with authors such as Louisa May Alcott and Harriet Beecher Stowe, has her female characters employ the Declaration of Independence to impart a political message. Barbara Bardes and Suzanne Gosset write, "Since women were not only excluded from voting and thus from direct participation in the political system, but were assigned a domestic and subordinate role within the household, for a woman to appropriate the Declaration of Independence to herself meant she was asserting her equality to men and her independence of male control" (1-2). When Magawisca is asked on the witness stand if she understands that the Bible "contains the only rule for the present life?" she replies, "I know that it contains thy rule...but the Great Spirit hath written his laws on the hearts of his original children, and we need it not" (Sedgwick 303). Magawisca refuses to accept

Puritan political or religious authority, making her, as Harris offers, “Sedgwick’s ideal citizen: rational, articulate, and self-confident...representative of a necessary and very positive stage in the evolution of the Republic” (276).

The fate of individual conscience in the young republic is at the heart of *Hope Leslie*. The novel, after the pre-story, jumps to 1643 with Hope Leslie writing a letter to her “brother,” Everell, who is studying in England. As they do in *Mansfield Park*, in *Hope Leslie* letters reveal one’s “true” identity and Judith Fetterly points out that by writing, Hope “establishes her ability to construct a coherent and functioning ‘I’ and hence her possession of the kind of literacy that matters for citizenship – the literacy of subjectivity that makes her capable of writing her own version of ‘history’” (“My Sister” 83). In this letter, Hope writes that “our new country develops faculties that young ladies, in England, [are] unconscious of possessing” (Sedgwick 102). America makes the difference, because in America a woman can possess the same faculties as her ‘brothers’ – virtues of independence and self-determination. In America, women can think critically, arming themselves with the skills to challenge authority. Hope demands both physical and intellectual freedom, and “like the bird that spreads his wings and soars above the limits by which each man fences in his own narrow domain, she ...permitted her mind to expand beyond the contracted boundaries of sectarian faith” (Sedgwick 128).

Hope’s “Education”

As a result of this freedom, Hope’s intellect is a source of pride, especially for her mentors. The narrator points out that “Nothing could be more unlike the authentic,

‘thoroughly educated,’ and thoroughly disciplined young ladies of the present day, than Hope Leslie” (Sedgwick 126). This is, of course, a backhanded compliment. Hope’s ability to “soar above the limits” is her ability to think critically and act according to her conscience, but who educates Hope? How has she developed her strong moral conscience? Hope’s mentors love her, but do not recognize the depths of her intellect because they do not share her acumen. The narrator explains: “Her aunt Grafton doated on her; she was the depository of her vanity, as well as of her affection. To her simple tutor, she seemed to embody all that philosophers and poets had set down in their books, of virtue and beauty” (Sedgwick 127).

Dame Grafton, Hope and Faith’s aunt who accompanies them from England, is a comic figure, but her books supplement Hope’s studies, expanding her world view. Women such as Esther Downing and Martha Fletcher who are “slavishly” devoted to scripture do not and would not partake of such texts. Martha Fletcher is especially appalled by Dame Grafton’s *Book of Common Prayer*, and writes to her husband: “Dame Grafton is strangely out of place here...and hath even ventured to read aloud from her book of Common Prayer – an offence the she hath been prevented from repeating by the profane jest of our son Everell.”⁵ In addition to her *Prayer Book*, Dame Grafton also possesses secular texts. When Master Cradock is bitten by a rattlesnake, Hope wants to suck the poison from the bite and assures the servant, Digby, “that I had read of many cases of poison being extracted in that way...He asked me where I had read such stories.

⁵ During a violent storm Dame Grafton was terrified and Everell suggested that she find a prayer for women about to be scalped. Mrs. Fletcher continues: “The poor lady, distracted with terror, seized the book and turned over leaf after leaf” (Sedgwick 31).

I was obliged to refer to a book of Aunt Grafton's called 'The Wonders of the Crusades.' This seemed to Digby but apocryphal authority" (Sedgwick 106). While Digby dismisses the book, in fact, had Hope administered that treatment her tutor might have been saved without Nelema's pagan services.

Master Cradock, is another comic figure who is nonetheless responsible for Hope's education. Although he is a comic figure, Craddock is a classically trained scholar who "not only wrote Greek and Latin and talked Hebrew like the Rev. Mr. Cotton, but...was skilled in Arabic, and the modern tongues" (Sedgwick 363). Cradock adores Hope, but the outdated curriculum he teaches her is a criticism of traditional education. Through Cradock, Sedgwick juxtaposes the dryness of philosophers, whose inquiries "will turn out like the experiment of the inquisitive boy, who cut open the drum to find the sound," with Hope's "imagination" (104). Sedgwick clearly favors imagination, and Ivy Schweitzer posits that "In Sedgwick's fictional universe, classicism requires naturalizing by an innocent and feeling heart, a principle represented by Hope" (179).

Cradock is constantly criticized, from Aunt Grafton remarking that "much learning and little wit had made him crazy as a loon" to Governor Winthrop calling him "an old man, whose original modicum of sense was greatly diminished by age and excess of useless learning" (Sedgwick 115, 363). But Hope turns to her "useless learning" when she enlists Cradock in her plan to free Magawisca. To convince Cradock to help her, Hope references "her Italian author" (Aristo, who composed *Orlando Furioso*) in whose work "Orlando hesitates whether to go the rescue of Beatrice" (320). For Hope, this

passage recalls “a duty to a friend who sadly needs my help.” Typical of Hope, this association combines romantic and benevolent impulses. Flattered, Cradock exclaims, “My help! – your friend! It shall be as freely granted as Jonathon’s was to David, or Orpheus’s to Eurydice” (320). Hope laughs at Cradock’s allusions, but shows, yet again, her ability to mine information from texts in the service of others.

Just as James Fenimore Cooper pairs interracial male friends, Sedgwick pairs Hope with Magawisca from whom she gains her greatest “education.” The dual heroines are independent women who speak against religious hypocrisy and arrogant imperialism. They represent Sedgwick’s “New World woman” in sharp contrast to women like Esther and Martha who embody “that passiveness, that, next to godliness, is a woman’s best virtue” (Sedgwick 160). Readers are meant to admire both heroines, and note how their friendship “embodies the conflicting qualities Sedgwick’s text struggles to integrate: on the one hand, a disinterested loyalty to community and nation and on the other hand, an independent conscience and unswerving commitment to impartial justice and equality” (Schweitzer 166). But Hope’s desire “to have her own way” seems antithetical to the concepts of community and friendship, and in a radical move Sedgwick seats the embodiment of perfect friendship in Magawisca (235).

When Magawisca appears at the Winthrop home in Boston to engineer a reunion of Hope and Faith, Hope recognizes her as “the heroine of Everell’s imagination, whom he had taught her to believe, was one of those who, ‘Withoute arte’s bright lampe, by nature’s eye, / Keep just promise, and love equitie’” (Sedgwick 194). These lines from William Morell’s poem, “New England” (1625) reference the honoring of vows among

illiterate Native Americans. And while Magawisca is indeed literate, she embodies this ideal when she ascends the rock to save Everell from execution. This act of charity sets the standard for all other acts in the novel, and makes Esther's refusal to act on Magawisca's behalf particularly painful.

Another figure who influences Hope is Esther. While Magawisca is Hope's parallel, Esther is her opposite. Esther is secretly in love with Everell, and when Hope recognizes this she advises: "'set a thief to catch a thief,' dear Esther, is an old maxim; and though I have never felt this nervous malady, yet, you know, I am skilled in the books that describe the symptoms, thanks to Aunt Grafton's plentiful tock of romances and plays" (Sedgwick 139). Esther cries, "Oh most unprofitable skill!" but concedes that Hope is right. In fact, when Esther's maid tells her that the minister saw some of her poetry, Esther blushes "with the consciousness that they were but a profane sentimental effusion" (Sedgwick 142). Yet again, Hope is right, and in both a medical situation and a matter of the heart she has been guided by Aunt Grafton's disparaged texts.

Esther's romantic demise is the result of her Puritan education. Sedgwick describes her as reserved and timid, "and being bred in the strictest school of the puritans, their doctrines and principles easily comingled with the natural qualities of her mind" (140). Esther's unrequited love for Everell is dangerous, her feelings, "like a stream, that being damned-up, flows back, and spreads desolation" (Sedgwick 136). Schweitzer believes that this "image suggest that self-contamination ensues when artificial strictures, like the Puritan letter of the law, impede the natural flow of human feelings," resulting in Esther's compassionate nature being deformed (190). Esther's passivity is most obvious

in her discussions with Hope. In one bizarre incident Hope finds herself in a rowboat with an Italian sailor, and to rescue herself she speaks to him in Italian and convinces him to row her ashore. When Hope is safely home and her strategy is discussed, Esther states that she would rather Hope “hadst trusted thyself wholly to Providence” (Sedgwick 286). Everell is disgusted. Esther personifies the limitations of passivity, and to demonstrate her point Sedgwick places both women in situations where obedience conflicts with conscience.

The heated political exchange that exposes Esther’s limits occurs when Everell and Hope are devising a plot to free Magawisca and they appeal to Esther for assistance. Esther knows that Magawisca is unjustly imprisoned, but refuses to participate, explaining that:

scripture hath abundant texts to authorize all mercy, compassion, and justice, but we are not always the allowed judges of their application; and in the case before us we have an express rule, to which, if we submit, we cannot err; for thou well knowest, Everell, we are commanded in the first of Peter, 2d chapter, to ‘submit ourselves to every ordinance of man, for the Lord’s sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evil doers.’ (Sedgwick 292)

In response, Everell articulates the novel’s progressive position, averring:

Esther, there must be warrant, as you call it, for sometimes resisting legitimate authority, or all our friends in England would not be at open war with their king. Withsuch a precedent, I should think the sternest conscience would permit you to obey the generous impulses of nature, rather than to render this slavish obedience to the letter of the law. (Sedgwick 292)

The position expressed by Hope and Everell is dialectically opposed to Esther's position, and the political consequences of their plan are highlighted by the allusion to Civil War.

Controlling Hope: The Threat of an Self-Reliant Woman

When Hope cites scripture to Cradock to entice him to participate in Magawisca's escape, she reminds him that "we are commanded to do good to all," countering the Puritan's narrow view. Schwetizer notes how in this statement, Hope "cleverly amends the exhortation in the title of Cotton Mather's influential Puritan tract *Bonifacius* (1710) – and thus argues against making distinctions based on religious or cultural difference" (311). Hope is clearly, like Everell, an apt pupil. However, Hope's acts in the service of conscience have red-flagged her to the Puritan authorities who appeal to William Fletcher to control her through marriage, since neither religious nor patriarchal authority is able to bridle her. Governor Winthrop articulates the dominant view when he expresses the need to subject "this lawless girl" to "the modest authority of a husband" (Sedgwick 160). His sentiments echo those of Lucy Freeman in *The Coquette* when she recommends marriage to Eliza Wharton who recognizes marriage as shackles. Fletcher diverges from Puritan ideology with his radical view on marriage, responding, "I should scarcely account... a property of soulless matter, a virtue," confirming his belief that women should enjoy a voice. The political ramifications of his argument are enormous. If Fletcher and other dissenters found grounds on which to justify immigration and regicide, why should women accept the divine right of men?

Not only does Fletcher defend Hope against marriage, he defends her against a specific type of suitor. There is a basis for Fletcher's wisdom. Prior to his conversation with Winthrop, Hope suffers through a sermon during which her patience was exhausted because the "young man, accounted a 'universal scholar,' seemed determined ... to tell all he knew in that one discourse...to Hope, he appeared to maintain one even pace straight forward, like the mortal in the fairy tale, sentenced to an eternal walk over a boundless plain" (Sedgwick 171). This is the problem that Hope encounters with Esther – a devotion to texts that allows no imaginative interpretations. Hope is far more attracted to Samuel Gorton who is on trial for his dissenting beliefs. When that "self-styled professor of mysteries spoke, Hope was so much interested in his genuine enthusiasm and mysticism, (for he was the Swedenborg of his day,) that she forgot her own secret subject of anxiety" (Sedgwick 172). So when Governor Winthrop suggests William Hubbard as a suitor, "a discreet young man, steeped in learning," Fletcher responds that these qualities "are not like to commend him to a maiden of Hope Leslie's temper. She inclineth not to bookish men" (Sedgwick 161). In a wonderful twist, the narrator informs us that Hope, "by her peculiar taste, lost at least the golden opportunity of illustrating herself by a union with the future historian of New-England" since William Hubbard (1621-1704) is the historian whose account of the Pequod War is revised in *Hope Leslie* (Sedgwick 161)!

Hope's temperament is what attracts her to Sir Philip Gardiner, a Marmion figure. He is old world, "yet he often deeply interested her with his lively descriptions of countries and manners unknown to her" (Sedgwick 167). Hope is attracted to people with

new ideas and information. Sir Philip is anti-Puritan in character, and when Hope quotes philosophy, suggesting “it is far easier, as is said in one of your good books, Master Cradock, ‘to subscribe to a sentence of universal condemnation, than to confess individual sins,’” Sir Philip replies, “what blessed times we have fallen on...when youthful beauties, instead of listening to the idle songs of troubadours, or the fantastic flatteries of vagrant knights...are exploring the mines of divinity” (Sedgwick 220).⁶ Sir Philip’s character is ultimately exposed and he flees to Europe, but this exchange is interesting because it suggests further intellectual prisons for women. While the Puritan fathers would like Hope to obey the dominant ideology, Sir Philip would fashion Hope as an old world victim of courtly love. Hope will be neither.

***Hope Leslie* as Political Critique**

Hope ultimately challenges Puritan law and frees Magawisca. Barbara Bardes argues, “The implicit theme in *Hope Leslie* is that a woman may be driven by her sense of political powerlessness to undertake civil disobedience,” but notes that reviewers of the day attributed Hope’s actions “to personality rather than confront their political significance” (27). But *Hope Leslie* is political – it is a critique of women’s limited role in the Republic under the guise of a historical novel. Sedgwick implies that almost two hundred years after her fictional setting, women’s roles have not changed. Women remain “imprisoned” by laws and ideologies. *Hope Leslie’s* emphasis on prisons

⁶ I believe that Hope is referring to the Augsburg Confession, also known as the "Augustana," which is the primary confession of faith of the Lutheran Church and an important document from the Lutheran Reformation, dating from 1530.

suggests that women who act independently risk a total loss of freedom. Hope's courage in challenging the state becomes even more radical considering the degree to which the state itself fears danger. References to treason abound in *Hope Leslie*. Set against the English Civil War, it features the treacherous Sir Philip, the imprisoned Thomas Morton, the exiled Samuel Gorton, and treachery among Indian tribes. Fetterly points out that "Hope's decision to free Magawisca suggests that she is indeed willing to take treason as her text in order to realize the possibility of America" ("My Sister" 86).

Hope acts of treason are performed in the name of justice, but they are a direct challenge to the state. Such representations of women's political activity have been documented by many scholars. Mary Beth Norton has commented on the changes in women's political consciousness stemming from the American Revolution, and in *Women of the Republic*, Linda Kerber argues that while the Revolution did not result in greater freedoms for women, between 1790 and 1820 women played a role within the home as "Republican Mothers" whose job was to promote civic duty in her children. But Sedgwick proposes an alternative for the political inclusion of women, a model Fetterly terms "Republican Sisterhood" which emphasizes the role of the daughter. In *Hope Leslie*, the daughter represented as a sister is the central figure, and Sedgwick's argument for women's inclusion as equal partners depends upon "the rhetoric of identity between brother and sister, a key component of Enlightenment liberal feminism" (Fetterly "My Sister" 84).

Sedgwick positions Everell as Hope's brother, and argues that the project of America falls to individuals like Hope and Everell, for whom "citizenship" is not a public

term. For example, when Everell appeals to Governor Winthrop to free Magawisca, Winthrop admonishes that : “this young woman is suspected of being an active agent in brewing the conspiracy forming against us among the Indian tribes; and it is somewhat bold in you to oppose the course of justice – to intermeddle with the public welfare” (Sedgwick 245). The tension between the political order and individual conscience is primarily exposed through Hope, who is more open-minded than the community because her heart tells her that “the rights of innocence were paramount to all other rights” (Sedgwick 124).

As Nina Baym notes in *American Women Writers and the Work of History*, women writing historical works “were demolishing whatever imaginative and intellectual boundaries their culture may have been trying to maintain between domestic and public worlds” (1). In *Hope Leslie*, Sedgwick calls for women in the early Republic to participate by applying their education toward progressive nation building. Sedgwick mocks the education of girls in her “enlightened” time when she asks readers to “Make all due allowance for a heroine of the seventeenth century, who had the misfortune to live before there was a system of education extant, who had not learned, like some young ladies of our enlightened days, to prattle of metaphysics – to quote Reid, and Stewart, and Brown” (222). Prattling and quoting is not the education that is required to affect meaningful change. Literate, thoughtful individuals like William Fletcher, Hope, Everell and Magawisca have the moral and intellectual tools as well as the independent spirit to challenge the authority of parents, magistrates, and kings, suggesting as Susan Harris writes, “that in this new society, all hierarchical relationships are open to challenge”

(275). As Digby proclaims, “This having our own way...is the privilege we came to this wilderness world for... and the liberty set forth in the blessed word, is now felt to be every man’s birthright” (Sedgwick 235). Hope believes in this birthright, and calls on her conscience, her heart, and her education to extend this privilege to all members of the young republic – this “blessed world.” However, Magawisca’s retreat into the forests and Hope’s engagement at novel’s end question her success.

Why Consider Women Readers in *Mansfield Park* vs. *Hope Leslie*?

While there is a thirteen year span in the publication of *Mansfield Park* and *Hope Leslie*, I was attracted to the two novels by the similarity of their contemporary national issues, their different approaches to these issues, and the vastly different nature of their heroines as products of Old World versus New World societies. Fanny Price, with her hardscrabble roots but aristocratic connections seems uniquely English, with the sensibility and hard won education necessary to grasp and amend social issues that directly impact her family. In contrast, Hope Leslie in her spirit, inclusive nature, and extensive reading exemplifies the promise of a new nation that is trying to find a foothold on the path to progress. Both heroines are avid readers and both use their critical thinking skills to improve their damaged communities, however, Fanny attempts to quietly reform the old order, while Hope’s is a more radical approach that aims toward sweeping political and social change.

When *Hope Leslie* was published in the 1820’s, John Quincy Adams was President (1825–1829). In addition to formulating the Monroe Doctrine, Adams

advocated modernization and education, and envisioned a nation based upon conservative republican values. He opposed slavery and championed a generous policy toward Native Americans at a time when settlers were calling for a more expansionist policy. It was Adams' successor, Andrew Jackson, who instigated Indian removal. In *Hope Leslie* these issues are present in the plight of the Pequods, Magawisca and Oneco's slavery, the Puritan immigration from England, and the threats presented by Sir Philip Gardiner.

Regency England was suffering from similar issues such as division over the slave trade, economic hardship, and threats to national security. As the plot of *Mansfield Park* unfolds, the reader becomes aware of the Bertram family's struggles as well as larger social and political questions. Jane Stabler writes that, "Of all Austen's novels, this is the one in which the repose of middle England, guarded by social hierarchy, tradition, and the big house, comes closest to outright destruction" (xi). Regency England was extremely unstable as George III supported a gentrified England, the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars threatened this order, the lower classes were suffering and the elite ran up enormous debts. Discontent was rampant, but people were divided on whether to revolt like the French or to reform the old order. Critics such as Edmund Burke warned that "Rage and phrenzy will pull down more in half an hour, than prudence, deliberation, and foresight can build up in a hundred years" (279). These issues appear in *Mansfield Park* as Sir Thomas must attend to his interests in Antigua, Fanny questions the practice of slavery, her Portsmouth family is impoverished, and her brothers serve in the Royal Navy protecting British interests.

So, if asked the question: “What kind of girls should we raise?” Austen and Sedgwick have very different responses. Reading empowers Fanny and Hope to exert influence, but what are the limits of that influence, and what are the political ramifications that such limits exist at all? In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny’s critical reading enables her to resist superficial attractions and correctly read the other characters. She leverages her knowledge and liminal position to act as stabilizing agent who can move between classes and recognize, expose and correct immoral behavior and excess. In *Hope Leslie*, Hope’s democratic reading represents her inclusive world views, and guides her efforts to destabilize Old World models to construct a more progressive society. Fanny’s reading is the kind that is necessary to stabilize England in the face of external and internal threats, while Hope’s reading is pressed into service to foster a more inclusive, benevolent society that will extend its promise of freedom to all of its members.

While Fanny is not Austen’s most popular heroine, her character embodies conservative qualities that Burke would approve of, and her approach to life lends itself to reforms guided by middle class sensibility. *Mansfield Park* is a complex political critique. At times, Austen echoes feminists like Wollstonecraft in her critique of decadence, the property system, and her belief in women’s intellect. On the other hand, Austen’s depiction of women as domestic guardians aligns her with the conservative ideology of writers like Burke and reformists like Hannah More. Fanny’s reading matters because it aligns her with both of these ideologies. It prepares her for a life with Edmund, informs her ability to read others, and most importantly, develops her moral conscience. Jane Stabler regards the novel as a radical social critique and expects readers to

empathize with Fanny. I admit that when I first read *Mansfield Park* I found it dull, but another reading showed a different side to Fanny and what I first found insipid about her revealed itself as inner strength. Some critics assert that Fanny does nothing but read and judge people, but Fanny is Mrs. Bertram's right hand, she rides, she gardens, she raises her siblings and now she must navigate hostile waters. The phrase "the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure" appears on the last page of the novel. *Mansfield Park* is about survival; survival as individuals and survival as a nation.

In contrast to *Mansfield Park's* political critique through class commentary, *Hope Leslie* considers more radical ideas such as the political engagement of women and social justice. In the 1820's, American novelists like Sedgwick and James Fennimore Cooper adopted the historical fiction model associated with Sir Walter Scott; a model which dramatized the tension between traditional and modern societies.⁷ In *Hope Leslie*, the marriage plot enables progress to absorb tradition, but if Hope and Everell's marriage represents the promise of the Republic, the failures of that promise including Indian removal, slavery, and the disenfranchisement of women is the cultural critique. While Sedgwick's Puritans laid the foundation for an enlightened nation, the novel focuses on their oppressive, authoritarian qualities to consider ideas about morality as the polity defines it, and as Hope questions their interpretation. Hope's skills as a reader enable her to support her ideas about justice and natural rights, and construct a web of relationships that could, if sustained, reflect the promise of a more tolerant society. Hope is a

⁷ While American historical novels borrowed from British literary models, women's historical fiction developed its own literary conventions, such as the tyrannical father, the rebellious daughter, interracial love, and the progressive marriage.

democratic reader who quotes the Bible, mythology, *The Divine Comedy*, Shakespeare, theology, historical works such as *The Wonders of the Crusades*, as well as Aunt Grafton's "romances and plays," and turns to her reading to assist friends, seek justice, and establish herself as an independent thinker. Hope's beliefs are based upon both her "natural feelings" and her reading, and through her example, readers are encouraged to seek knowledge, use it wisely, and assert themselves in the name of social progress and political equality.⁸

Both *Mansfield Park* and *Hope Leslie* tackle pressing issues such as land ownership, slavery, the role of the church and the price of poorly educating women, and in both texts patriarchal authority is failing. If, as Armstrong argues, Austen "strives to empower a new class of people – not powerful people, but normal people – whose ability to interpret human behavior qualifies them to regulate the conduct of daily life," Fanny Price is the ideal representative of that new class (136). Her education, responsible reading, morality, and steadiness enable her to regulate the behavior of others in the service of social stability. Hope, on the other hand, is a free spirit who cannot always interpret human behavior because she is motivated by her own conscience and uniquely American ideas about rights and freedoms, even when those freedoms do not extend to

⁸ Ironically, *Hope Leslie's* emphasis on the value of "natural feeling" undermines much of its racial and gender commentary. While the novel suggests that sympathy can overcome differences, the romance plot denies that possibility. The seed for this complication is planted when Hope reunites with her assimilated sister. While Faith's assimilation would seem to negate racial categories, Hope's revulsion is telling. The failure of sympathy is confirmed when Magawisca renounces her feelings for Everell. Their union would pose a radical solution for colonial America and, by implication, contemporary America, but Magawisca's change from the child of nature to the inheritor of vengeance denies this possibility (349). In the end, sympathy cannot overcome certain barriers.

her. Fanny and Hope are both guided by their reading, but Fanny's stabilizing influence is through genteel, quiet example, while Hope's influence is through imaginative thought and daring actions commensurate with the promise of an undeveloped nation.

Conflicting ideas about women's domestic roles and national allegiance extend into Chapter Four, where I consider the reading practices of Lucy Snowe in Charlotte's Brontë's *Villette*, and Ellen Montgomery in Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*. Like *Mansfield Park* and *Hope Leslie*, these novels complicate the mid-century view of women's reading and domesticity, and how these elements impact ideas of nation. While Brontë offers a scathing critique of British society through her argument that women should read for utilitarian purposes, Warner champions reading to reinforce domestic roles that will ultimately strengthen the nation.

I chose *The Wide Wide World* because like Hope Leslie before her, Ellen Montgomery is an orphan being raised by distant relatives and friends, and she is also a patriot who is eager to defend her "natural rights" against European patriarchal authority. But America in 1850 was far different than it was in 1827, impacted by events such as The Indian Removal Act of 1830, the abolitionist movements of the 1840's, Westward Expansion, and an influx of European immigration. While Sedgwick's solution for a stronger nation was for intelligent women to foster a more tolerant society through action, sentimental fiction like *The Wide Wide World* encourages women to embrace domesticity, and promotes reading to encourage moral improvement, Christian principles and patriotism. Through her reading, Ellen becomes a model, middle class American, but ironically, ideal reading is ultimately subordinate to ideal femininity. While Hope's

engagement to Everell is represented as a union of intellectual equals, Ellen's marriage more closely resembles the patriarchal society in which she lives.

Unlike Warner, In *Villette*, Brontë scrutinizes the mid-century ideology that a woman's role was in the home. I chose *Villette* because its social critique is such a drastic departure from *Mansfield Park*. Where Austen suggests that moral, intelligent middle class citizens can reform society from within, Brontë suggests that for women, reform is beyond reach, and to survive they must forge a new path. Opportunities for women could strengthen society, but such opportunities do not exist. Because of the surplus of single women in mid-century England, marriage is no longer the answer, nullifying the "domestic angel" model as the foundation of social stability. Lucy Snowe reads to work and works to survive. *Villette* critiques both the condition of women and the oppressive social system that dismisses them. Through Lucy, Brontë shows readers that an intellectual woman can find a place in the world, although she may have to leave England to do so. Lucy uses her education to find an alternative role to the domestic ideal, challenging the patriarchal culture that mandated embracing that role.

CHAPTER IV

HOME SWEET HOME: CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S *VILLETTE* AND SUSAN WARNER'S *THE WIDE, WIDE WORLD*

In *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong writes that “it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that the project of gendering subjectivity began to acquire the immense political influence it still exercises today... Authors suddenly took notice of social groups who had hardly mattered before” (20). Like the heroines of their novels, Charlotte Brontë and Susan Warner were both young women in precarious social situations that limited their access to better society and romantic opportunities.¹ Accordingly, their fictions speak to the social and economic dilemmas of women in equally difficult situations. Warner’s American orphan, Ellen Montgomery and Brontë’s British spinster, Lucy Snowe, fall into this marginal category.

Reformers and authors were attributing the staggering numbers of impoverished citizens not exclusively to sweeping economic changes, but to the individuals themselves, whose behavior was not properly gendered. Education was the key, and the English adopted a national curriculum for women modeled on the theory of the Edgeworths,

¹ Charlotte Brontë’s mother died in 1821, and in 1824, Charlotte was sent with three of her sisters to school at Cowan Bridge, where poor conditions hastened the deaths of her two older sisters. In Haworth,—a bleak village on the moors—Charlotte worked as a teacher and governess until in 1842 she enrolled in a school in Brussels, where she became lonely, homesick and attached to the headmaster. Upon her return to Haworth the sisters unsuccessfully attempted to open their own school. In 1846, *The Professor* was rejected for publication. The following year, *Jane Eyre* was published. Branwell died in 1848, followed by Emily in 1849 and Anne in 1849.

essentially designed to produce a marriageable daughter. This is the education that fails *Villette*'s protagonist, Lucy Snowe, and she is forced to sacrifice her social self to pursue a life of intellectual labor on foreign soil. In the American novel, *The Wide, Wide World*, Ellen Montgomery's education follows a different, uniquely American trajectory as her mentors prepare her for life as a Protestant, republican, domestic woman.

The Wide, Wide World (1850) and *Villette* (1852) complicate the prevailing mid-century view of ideal domesticity. In these two very different novels, the cerebral heroines employ education, and in particular, reading, to understand the relationship between domesticity and self-denial, and to establish agency that enables them to survive and influence others. Both novels also consider ideas of nation through the lens of reading. Warner's sentimental novel promotes guided reading as a means to develop strong morals, Christian principles, and national pride in its distinctly American heroine. *The Wide, Wide World* initially focuses on the relationship between Ellen Montgomery and her ill mother, but when Ellen is sent to live with her Aunt Fortune, she meets her surrogate mother, Alice Humphreys and her brother, John Humphreys, both of whom guide her intellectual and moral development. Ellen is later sent to live with relatives in Scotland where she is expected to surrender her nationality and religious beliefs, but her strong foundation enables her to resist her Scottish relatives' demands, and proudly retain her identity as a Protestant and an American. *The Wide, Wide World* is concerned with finding ideal womanhood through right reading guided by responsible role models.

Unlike Warner's novel, *Villette* is a challenge to the narrow domestic ideal that critics and social commentators like John Ruskin championed. Charlotte Brontë was

painfully familiar with the limited career opportunities available to women, and *Villette* is her attempt to validate the spinster's experience. Model domesticity eludes the novel's heroine, Lucy Snowe, who after an unexplained family disaster leaves England for the fictional city of Villette where she finds work at a girls' pensionnat and experiences her own educational process, psychological drama, and romance. Leaving England is the catalyst for Lucy's self-discovery, but in Villette, the alienation that she experienced in England is magnified. As Andrea Herrera writes in *Family Matters in the British and American Novel*: "Not only is she friendless and without references, but she lacks even the most basic and essential tool to establish her identity: language" (9). But as she grows intellectually and gains professional clout, Lucy's social invisibility becomes a source of power. Lucy uses her hard-won education to circumvent the limitations of a domestic role, challenging the patriarchal British culture that mandated embracing that role. The final chapter launches Lucy into the world where she establishes herself as the headmistress of her own school. *Villette*'s foreign setting and Lucy's intellectual authority enable her to move past the limited role prescribed to women in England.

Anti-Domesticity in *Villette*

The Brontës understood how to write political novels. According to Armstrong, "Novels were supposed to rewrite political history as personal histories that elaborated on the courtship procedures ensuring a happy domestic life" (38). Novels appeared to avoid politics, but the Brontë's, Jane Austen, Susan Warner, and other successful novelists understood that the most powerful national critiques were concealed. The Brontës

disguised the social contract within the sexual contract, arguing that a woman becomes enfranchised through marriage, in exchange for which she forfeits her political identity. But a single woman's status was complicated. While Charlotte Brontë gives Jane Eyre some freedom and mobility, she does not offer those options to the spinster teacher, Lucy Snowe. Lucy is a victim of the prevailing attitude toward middle-class white women in mid-nineteenth century Britain.

During this time, opportunities for women were extremely limited. Women were denied access to higher education and to most professions. Domestically based professions such as teaching, nursing, or governessing were middle-class women's primary options. This inability to earn wages outside of the home left the large majority of middle to upper-class women financially dependent upon men. In "Of Queen's Gardens" (1865), Ruskin paints an idyllic image of the home as a protected garden—a center of peace and morality headed by a domestic woman. Such images, accompanied by much of the writing of the period, propagated nineteenth century attitudes about a woman's place in the home and in society.

In *Villette*, Brontë contests the prevailing ideology, challenging the idea that a woman's destiny is in the home as a wife and mother. Herrera observes that Lucy Snowe represents "the plight of a genteel, Victorian spinster who must carve out a space for herself, both economically and physically, in a society in which female identity is largely dependent upon pedigree, personal appearance, and sexual integrity" (5). In search of a place in the world and an identity, Lucy embarks on a quest, and in the foreign city of

Villette she establishes herself as an independent agent. As such, she is free of male authority, yet open to the possibility of love.

I read *Villette* as a challenge, almost a reality check, to the domestic ideal championed by writers such as Ruskin. Brontë was fully aware that single women such as herself were flooding Britain. In fact, by “mid-century nearly one out of every four English women was dependent upon her own resources; by 1850 there were over half a million more women than men in England” (Herrera 57). Single women who were unable to compete in the marriage market had to find ways to support themselves. Without husbands, these women became governesses, companions to the elderly, nurses, and social workers. The Brontë sisters fell into this marginal group, and *Villette* is a condemnation of Britain’s sociopolitical ideology and economic structure, and the nation in which it was so deeply rooted.

Imagining Villette

Villette’s secretive narrator, Lucy Snowe, is not a spinster by choice. Circumstances have worked against her, and her limited social and economic options ultimately force her hand. The novel begins with Lucy, at age fourteen, observing her godmother, Mrs. Bretton, Mrs. Bretton’s son, Graham, and a young visitor, Paulina “Polly” Home. Polly is a precocious child who develops an attachment to Graham who humors her until her father takes her away. Lucy leaves soon after, and is hired as a companion to a rheumatic spinster, Miss Marchmont. Just as Lucy becomes comfortable in her new lifestyle, Miss Marchmont shares her sad story of unrequited love with Lucy

then dies, leaving Lucy penniless. Lucy drifts for several years until an unspecified family tragedy occurs and her feelings of alienation inspire her, at age twenty three, to emigrate to Villette, capital of the imaginary kingdom of Labassecour. Although Lucy does not speak French, she hopes to find employment and a “home” outside of England’s oppressive borders. In Villette, Lucy finds work first as a governess, and later as a teacher at Mme. Beck's pensionnat for girls, where she thrives professionally and intellectually.

At the school, Lucy meets Dr. John, a young English physician who visits the school to flirt with Ginevra, a coquette. In a plot twist, Dr. John is revealed to be Graham Bretton, a fact that Lucy deliberately conceals from the reader. When Dr. John turns his attention to Lucy, they develop a friendship that the emotionally distant Lucy deeply values. “Polly” reenters the narrative at this point as Paulina Home de Bassompierre, a product of her father’s newly acquired title. When Dr. John rescues Polly from being trampled at the theatre, they discover their past and fall in love. As Lucy predicts, they marry, which Lucy understands but does not celebrate. While all of this is happening, Lucy experiences several encounters with a spectral nun, which may be the ghost of a nun who is rumored to have been buried alive on the property of the pensionnat for breaking her vows of celibacy.¹

¹ Lucy’s internal crisis is marked by her three encounters with the spectral nuns. Graham and M. Paul are both associated with a separate nun. Lucy’s first two encounters take place in the attic of the pensionnat. The first encounter occurs while Lucy is reading a letter from Graham, and frightens her as she dresses to attend Vashti’s performance. Lucy’s third encounter with the spectral nun occurs after she buries Graham’s letters beneath the tree where the legendary nun is supposedly buried (422). Lucy has not yet discovered the nun’s purpose because she does not know the nun’s identity, information she will not have until her “education” is complete. She must first accept that Graham prefers Polly, and later, confront her feelings for M. Paul.

Lucy finds herself becoming drawn to her mentor, the passionate headmaster M. Paul Emanuel, and they fall in love. However, forces sabotage the relationship by sending M. Paul to the West Indies to manage affairs on a relative's plantation. Before sailing, he declares his love for Lucy and explains that he has arranged for her to live independently as the headmistress of her own school. *Villette's* ending is ambiguous. While Lucy claims that she wants to let the reader imagine a happy ending, she hints that M. Paul's ship was destroyed by a storm on his return to Villette when she confesses that "the three happiest years of [her] life" were those *before* M. Paul's return journey.

Who is Lucy Snowe? Public and Private Identity in *Villette*

Faced with her own circumstances as a curate's daughter, Charlotte Brontë was well aware of the plight of the Victorian spinster, and *Villette* dramatizes the circumstances of a woman seeking an identity in a society that does not value her. *Villette* is concerned with the subject of personal versus public identity, and challenges the reader with Lucy's masking as she allows people (including the reader) to see only what she wants them to see. As such, nobody seems to really "know" the unreliable narrator. Lucy's absence of identity is the opposite to that of her foster family, the Brettons, who are so established that their very name implies that they represent all of Britain. In contrast, Lucy lacks a physical home; she has no family, and does not feel at home in England or with herself. She is homeless in every sense. Lucy moves from home to home as a tenant/employee, fully aware of her marginal position and referring to herself as "a placeless person" (48). Herrera observes that once Lucy arrives in Villette, "the social

displacement and alienation that Lucy experienced in England is temporarily magnified, for she is literally an alien on foreign turf” (59). In defense, Lucy establishes an independent identity and operates in an emotionally detached manner. One way Lucy accomplishes this is through her refusal to narrate.

How does a reader interpret Lucy’s deliberate withholding of critical information? The most jarring instance of this is her revelation that she recognized “Dr. John” as Graham Bretton long before she shares this information with *Villette*’s readers, callously writing that “The discovery was not of to-day, its dawn had penetrated my perceptions long since” (195). Her explanation of her silence on this issue to Graham and to the novel’s readers emphasizes Lucy’s rejection of speech: “To *say* anything on the subject, to *hint* at my discovery, had not suited my habits of thought” (195). Lucy’s failure to identify herself to Graham is often interpreted as an expression of self-doubt, but Lucy simply privileges writing over speech, and Ivan Kreilkamp suggests that Lucy’s commitment to writing can be alternately read as “Brontë’s analysis of the situation of writing and print in mid-century England. In this culture, she suggests, prestige, power and reward--professional advancement--follow most effectively not from assertions of personal identity and erotic or vocal charisma but from mastery of the flow of print and information” (342).

This point is driven home in yet another renunciation of vocal performance when Lucy is forced by M. Paul to act in a play. When he gives her the playbook to read she memorizes it, although she claims “It was a disagreeable part...I hated it” (148). But after practicing she realizes that the part is manageable, and she “learned and learned on,

first in a whisper, and then aloud” (149). On the evening of the performance, Lucy admits that she “played it with relish” (155). She becomes invested in her role, and her performance is a triumph, but for no apparent reason Lucy vows never to act again: “A keen relish for dramatic expression had revealed itself as part of my nature; to cherish and exercise this new-found faculty might gift me with a world of delight, but it would not do for a mere looker-on at life” (156). Her decision is final, and Lucy never acts in another play. In typical scholarly fashion, Lucy studied the book and learned the role, but she disapproves of the pleasure she experiences from the performance and retreats into her shell. Again, Brontë provides no space for the intersection of independence and pleasure for her heroine.

As her stoical demeanor indicates, Lucy believes she is morally and intellectually superior to women like Polly and Ginevra who revel in theatrical performance and whom she considers to be pawns. But Lucy is so emotionally crippled by her Victorian education and the ideals of female behavior that accompany it, that her repressed passion for Graham Bretton and later for M. Paul threatens her emotional stability. Her renunciation of drama is an example of the danger Lucy is in, because as Herrera points out, “The oppressive environment of the demi-convent, coupled with the emotional and physical isolation of the life Lucy has chosen to lead, cause her to undergo an identity crisis which pits her authentic and natural emotional self against her passionless social self, a crisis which leads her to the very brink of madness” (61).

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar called *Villette* “perhaps the most moving and terrifying account of female deprivation ever written”

(400). By “deprivation,” they mean Lucy’s silence which deprives her of an identity. Or does it? I argue that there is power in Lucy’s silence, encouraging her to favor texts over speech. In an early example, Lucy witnesses Polly’s reunion with her father and avers: “on all occasions of vehement, unrestrained expansion, a sense of disdain or ridicule comes to the weary spectator's relief” (17). Lucy does not want to participate in speech, and according to Krielkamp, “Brontë suggests that narrative best flourishes in that acid moment of distaste for the voicing of emotions, for the excitement and heat of private or public vocal reading” (340). One of Lucy’s final statements, “There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope” sums up her narrative strategy which advocates silence, writing, and isolation (546).

Lucy’s Snowe’s Textual Obsession

Lucy's inner monologue about the worthlessness of speech occurs immediately after she receives a letter from Dr. John. She is starved for companionship, and treats the letter as an item that will literally heal her. She rejoices, “I held in my hand a morsel of real solid joy; not a dream, not an image of the brain” (266). Lucy values the letter itself not as a substitute for speech, but as a material item of real value. She describes her experience receiving it:

Yes: I held in my hand not a slight note, but an envelope, which must, at least, contain a sheet: it felt, not flimsy, but firm, substantial, satisfying. And here was the direction, ‘Miss Lucy Snowe,’ in a clean, clear, equal, decided hand; and there was the seal, round, full, deftly dropped by untremulous fingers, stamped with the welt-cut impress of initials, ‘J.G.B.’ I experienced a happy feeling--a glad emotion which went warm to my heart, and ran lively through all my veins. (266)

Lucy's attention to the physical details of the letter could be interpreted as substituting Dr. John's writing for his presence, but after Lucy loses the letter and Dr. John appears in the flesh, it is clear that this is not the case. Lucy realizes that John is physically present, and as such she should not miss the letter, but she laments, "I *cannot bear* to lose it" (275). Lucy does not crave Dr. John; she craves his writing.

Lucy's experience at the Catholic "la lecture piuese" anticipates her response to John's letters and to other occasions where writing trumps speech. In this episode, Lucy passively listens to a reading of deeds by saints and martyrs and then feels guilty for becoming excited by the reading. She declares: "I would have given two francs for the chance of getting that book once into my hands, turning over the sacred yellow leaves, ascertaining the title, and perusing with my own eyes the enormous figments which, as an unworthy heretic, it was only permitted me to drink in with my bewildered ears" (129). Lucy wants the book in her hands so she may read it privately and avoid the public reading. Her awareness of her physical reaction to the reading, that "it made me so burning hot, and my temples and my heart and my wrist throbbed so fast" associates vocal readings with impropriety (130). As a result, she determines to avoid public storytelling in the future.

Another instance of Lucy's rejection of speech occurs during a scene of quiet study, when M. Paul "burst in on the silent hour of study, [and] ... caused books to be put away" (364). M. Paul's intrusion is unwelcome, although he would "show us a glimpse of the current literature of the day, read us passages from some enchanting tale, or the last witty feuilleton which had awakened laughter in the saloons of Paris" (364). He turns the

study hall into a speech community, and of course it is Lucy who disrupts this community. When M. Paul sits near her, Lucy reports that she “swept away my working materials, to clear space for his book, and withdrew myself, to make room for his person” (366). Paul is insulted and spitefully rearranges the seating. Lucy, however, is unfazed and remarks that “I took it with entire coolness. There I sat, isolated and cut off from human intercourse; I sat and minded my work, and was quiet, and not at all unhappy” (366).

Why does Lucy revel in isolation and refuse to express herself? When the angry M. Paul reads a poor French translation of Shakespeare, Lucy critically reports that she did not “make any particular effort to conceal the contempt which some of [his] forlorn lapses were calculated to excite. Not that it behooved or beseemed me to *say* anything” (366). Lucy consistently forfeits community in favor of solitary work. This is the price of independence. At the novel’s conclusion, Brontë depicts Lucy as an independent professional who says that she “commenced my school; I worked--I worked hard” (543). While the school is founded by M. Paul for Lucy’s benefit, in his absence, her solitary intellectual pursuits have prepared her for this role.

Lucy’s Intellectual Pursuits

Villette is largely concerned with Lucy’s relationship to print, and her mission in *Villette* is to develop a professional identity based on a mastery of writing. As such, I argue that Lucy’s obsession with reading and writing is a statement about the absolute choices that English women had to make to survive as independent agents. While Lucy

sacrifices the companionship associated with speech, she is rewarded intellectually and professionally: “from that day I ceased to be nursery-governess, and became English teacher. Madame raised my salary” (89). Lucy’s professional success is based on her recognition that knowledge is found in books, not in personal interactions.

Lucy’s focus is on writing and intellectual labor with a full acceptance of the emotional sacrifice that attends her forfeiture of human companionship. In a key scene depicting Lucy’s first teaching trial, she controls an unruly classroom with a display of textual authority that proves she has the “stuff” to be an instructor. Brontë depicts Lucy confronting a classroom of disruptive students, to which she reacts with a display of textual power that produces order. Lucy does not attempt to gain control with her voice. Although she acknowledges that “Nature had given me a voice that could make itself heard,” and imagines using sarcasm to “get command over this wild herd,” she knows that her French is too limited to establish authority (88).

Using texts to establish control, Lucy takes one of the offending students’ composition books and reads an essay from it which she explains: “I found very stupid, and as deliberately, and in the face of the whole school, tear[s] the blotted page in two” (88). Lucy’s judgment and destruction of the essay quickly establish her authority. Kreilkamp posits that “In *Villette*, Brontë extends her emphasis on the importance of literary taste in the figure of a heroine whose social value derives entirely from her pedagogical authority” (345). After Lucy’s initial display of authority, one girl continues to misbehave, and Lucy shelves her like a book reporting that the girl “sat close to a little door, which door, I was well aware, opened into a small closet where books were kept

In another instant she occupied the closet, the door was shut, and the key in my pocket” (89). To Lucy, people are themselves texts to be judged.

Unfortunately, as is evidenced by this aggressive incident, education and sadness seem to go hand in hand. This mood is set early in the novel when Polly, at Graham’s behest proves herself a “ready scholar” by reciting the story of Jacob’s mourning for Joseph (32). Like Polly, Lucy identifies intellectual pursuits with sorrow, and when M. Paul begins to tutor her she admits that “A depressing and difficult passage has prefaced every new page I have turned in life. So long as this passage lasted, M. Paul was very kind...he saw the sharp pain inflicted, and felt the weighty humiliation imposed by my own sense of capacity” (389). But M. Paul is not always kind, and while Lucy is pained by his condescension, she recognizes its value: “when . . . Paul sneered at me, I wanted to possess [the noble hunger for science] more fully; his injustice stirred in me ambitious wishes-it imparted a strong stimulus-it gave wings to aspiration” (390). Considering her teaching style, it is clear that Lucy adopts M. Paul’s aggressive pedagogical techniques.

Reading and writing continue to pain Lucy throughout the novel, and in one incident when she produces an impressive essay for M. Paul, she is accused of plagiarism by two “dandy professors of the college” who doubt that any woman could have written so well. M. Paul demands that Lucy defend her writing under interrogation, but Lucy refuses to answer: “I either *could* not, or *would* not speak,” and refuses to explain her silence (443). They question her knowledge of classics, French history and “various ‘ologies,” but Lucy remains silent. She explains to the reader that when she was assigned the topic it was new to her, but Lucy is a scholar and as such, she began to research:

“With me it was a difficult and anxious time till my facts were found, selected, and properly jointed; nor could I rest from research and effort till I was satisfied of correct anatomy” (444). Texts are the source of her intellectual authority.

To prove her talents, the pundits demand that Lucy produce an essay on “Human Justice.” Just as Lucy steels herself to refuse them, she recognizes the two men as the rogues who “had driven a friendless foreigner beyond her reckoning and strength” when she first landed in Vilette (445). Lucy is inspired and writes a satire, thinking “If ‘Human Justice’ were what she ought to be, you two would scarce hold your present post” (445). Lucy’s own “justice” is satisfying because in spite of their formal education, her accusers are not savvy enough to realize that the satire is leveled against them.

Jon Hodge, in “*Vilette*’s Compulsory Education” writes, “By far, Lucy’s most impressive piece of melancholic writing is *Vilette* itself, which she narrates with the full force of her desire for the conquest of knowledge” (916). Lucy craves knowledge and laments “Oh! Why did nobody undertake to make me clever while I was young enough to learn, that I might... by one cold, cruel, overwhelming triumph – have for ever crushed the mocking spirit of Paul Carl David Emmanuel!” (393). But *Vilette* is about more than revenge. Lucy left England to earn a living, but she learns more than simply how to survive in Vilette. She learns that while her English education was not satisfactory, it also was not wrong – driven to this conclusion by her own experience as well as M. Paul’s mocking remarks about women of intellect. During a tutorial he states that “‘a woman of intellect’, it appeared, was a sort of luckless accident, a thing for which there was neither place nor use in creation, wanted neither as a wife nor worker...hein?” (393).

Paul taunts Lucy to force her to defend her worth, but she declines to respond. Lucy will not assert that she has the right to be both a woman of intellect and a social being, and the novel's conclusion supports the interpretation that Brontë agrees with her.

Leaving Sunny Imaginations Hope

Villette concludes with Lucy's departure from the cloistered world of the pensionnat into the wider world to operate as an independent agent. Herrera notes that "Despite her linguistic and cultural displacement in Villette, the foreign setting functions as a positive distancing factor which allows Lucy to acknowledge and overcome the seemingly insurmountable obstacles and limitations placed on her by patriarchal British culture" (65). In many ways, Brontë avoids directly challenging British patriarchal ideology, because although Lucy remains abroad, she enters a career aligned with women. Further, Lucy achieves her independence because of M. Paul's efforts, indicating Brontë's acceptance of the reality that even successful women required male support. The novel concludes several years after M. Paul's departure (and presumably his death) with Lucy enjoying economic independence running her own school, indicating that although Lucy benefitted professionally and emotionally from their relationship, she has prospered on her own.

Brontë provides some compensation for Paul's absence in descriptions of his writing: "By every vessel he wrote; he wrote as he gave and as he loved, in full-handed, full-hearted plenitude" (544). But Brontë ends *Villette* with yet another of Lucy's withholdings. Lucy writes that M. Paul's ship, returning home from the West Indies after

three years was caught in a storm, and describes her longing to hear his voice again: “Oh! a thousand weepers, praying in agony on waiting shores, listened for that voice, but it was not uttered” (544). Are these “weepers” the novel’s readers? If so, they are disappointed. Brontë denies them closure with the finality of Lucy’s narrative: “There is enough said” (546). Lucy refuses to reveal whether M. Paul survived, opting to “leave sunny imaginations hope” (546). Why does Brontë deny readers a happy ending? Perhaps her withholding mirrors Lucy’s motives – to generate value by championing silence and textual power. *Villette* concludes with Lucy heading her own school, and she boasts, “My school flourishes, my house is ready” (544). In *Villette*, companionship associated with speech is superseded by the personal and professional satisfaction that a life of reading, writing and scholarship can offer. That such sacrifice is necessary is a testament to the oppressive nature of England’s social ideology, and a critique of the restrictions it places on more than half of its population.

The Wide, Wide World and the Sentimental Novel

If English authors were suggesting that education was the key to surviving as a single woman, albeit with the sacrifice of the social self, what role were American authors advocating for women? Did circumstances allow a woman flourish socially and intellectually in mid-century America? Unlike *Villette*, Susan Warner’s American bildungsroman, *The Wide, Wide World* is a textbook example of mid-century sentimental writing that promoted the dominant ideology of the domestic woman. In *Reforming the World*, Maria Sanchez writes that “In US literary studies, there are few terms with more

vexed histories than sentimentality. It has been approached as a literary style and as a cultural phenomenon, as an empowering discourse and as one complicit with racist, imperialist, and class-based social dominance” (107). Sentimental novels shared many features, such as emotions, tears, religious sentiment, death, and the intrinsic belief that all people have value. Sentimental writing in America became popular in the 1770’s and flourished for almost a hundred years until the Civil War ended the genre’s reign. From 1779-1820, about 80% of American novels were written in the sentimental mode.

In her study, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (1985), Jane Tompkins contends that writers like Cooper, Stowe, and Warner wrote to alter society through novels which depended on characteristics that formalist criticism hates, including stereotypes, sensation, and clichés. Judith Fetterley's emphasis on the power of such texts to shape beliefs suggests that critics should study the “cultural work” texts have done, and respect readers who purchased bestsellers. Like Fetterly, Tompkins contends that American texts have “designs on female readers,” and as Jay Gregory writes, Tompkins “ties her brand of reader response theory to the cultural work movement, bridging the kind of historical scholarship done by Nina Baym in *Woman’s Fiction* (1978) with the critical methods of New Historicism” (104). To explain the cultural basis for these “designs,” Tompkins writes in her introduction that “I have...not criticized the social and political attitudes that motivated these writers, but have tried instead to inhabit and make available to a modern audience the viewpoint from which their politics made sense” (xiii). Domestic ideology set women up as agents for social change, and there is value in the cultural work that sentimental novels performed in their

historical moment. In her afterword to the *The Wide, Wide World*, Tompkins urges critics to mine texts whose apparent ideologies of Christian submission and domesticity can be seen as an empowering discourse.

Feminist critics have championed the cultural value of sentimental novels for decades, and with perhaps the exception of Harriet Beecher Stowe, no author represents the sentimental ideology more thoroughly than Susan Warner. Warner wrote novels, religious tracts, essays, and a children's magazine. She was prolific, popular, and her domestic novels appealed to readers for their religious, patriotic, and personal themes. Warner was born in 1819 into a wealthy New York family, but in the Panic of 1837 her father lost the family's money in real estate deals and they became impoverished.² In 1840 Warner experienced a religious conversion that changed her life, and its effects are present in her writing. She began writing to support her family, and in 1850 G. P. Putnam grudgingly published *The Wide, Wide World* at his mother's behest.³ The novel was a huge success.⁴ Warner's writing had an enormous impact, and heroines of other novels, such as Jo March, are seen reading her work.

² Susan Bogert Warner was born in New York City. Her father, Henry Warner, was a successful lawyer, and her mother was from a wealthy New York family. Warner's mother died when she was young, and Henry Warner lost his fortune in the Panic of 1837. The family had to leave their New York City mansion and move to a Revolutionary War-era farmhouse on Constitution Island, near West Point. Susan began writing out of financial necessity.

³ George Palmer Putnam printed *The Wide, Wide World* in 1850. According to legend, Putnam was at his summer home when he received the manuscript, and he had his mother read it. After reading it, his mother exclaimed, "If you never publish another book, publish this!"

⁴ *The Wide, Wide World* was a transatlantic best-seller, and was reprinted by eight different publishers from 1851-1853 and translated into five languages. In *Sensational Designs* Jane Tompkins writes that the novel "caused an explosion...that was absolutely unprecedented – nothing like it, in terms of sales, had ever been seen before" (148).

The Wide, Wide World initially focuses on the relationship between a ten year old girl, Ellen Montgomery, and her loving, terminally ill mother. They are separated when Ellen's mother follows Ellen's unsuccessful father abroad, and Ellen is sent to live with her Aunt Fortune on her New York farm. Her Aunt is a cold, bitter woman, but Ellen learns, with the help of compassionate adults, to submit her will to God and to the task of living with her Aunt. Ellen later goes to live at the home of her friend and surrogate mother, Alice Humphreys, where she meets Alice's brother, John Humphreys, who becomes her surrogate father, spiritual guide, and future husband. After Alice's death, Ellen is sent to live with relatives in Scotland where she is expected to surrender her nationality and her strong religious beliefs. Eventually, John arrives, brings her home to America, and marries her. This final chapter, which offers the "happy ending" only implied in earlier editions, was not published until Jane Tompkins's 1987 edition.⁵

The Wide Wide World is a female bildungsroman that was designed as a moral and Christian guide for its young, female readers. The changing economic landscape of antebellum America that resulted in a rising, literate middle class brought forth a large number of advice manuals for young women, and reading was an activity that these manuals and domestic novels aimed to regulate.⁶ Richard Brodhead links "disciplinary

⁵ In 1987, after decades of critical neglect, *The Wide Wide World* was reissued by the Feminist Press in an enlarged edition that featured a concluding chapter written by Warner and featured in the novel's original manuscript, but dropped by her original publisher.

⁶ Reformers condemned novel reading for many reasons, including economic implications. "Not only was reading novels and idle activity," comments Baym, but "the content of novels saturated women's imagination with depictions of frivolous people. Novels were thus associated with idleness, waste, and – dread word in the republican lexicon – luxury." (qtd. Sanchez 169)

themes to literacy, arguing that the private, leisured middle class home encouraged novel reading as a means to enclose and limit subjects within clear and predictable boundaries” (Silverman 4).⁶ The Bible also served this purpose, as we see when Ellen learns of her mother’s impending departure and reacts passionately, but is guided by her mother to read her Bible and the beauty of the words “awed her into quiet, and [...] turned her attention entirely from herself” (Warner 27). *The Wide, Wide World* is ultimately concerned with finding ideal womanhood which constitutes virtues of submission, self-denial, kindness, and piety. With the exception of Aunt Fortune, who finds reading frivolous, maternal influences shape this ideal. Catherine O’Connell notes “in the opposition between Alice and Aunt Fortune, reading becomes a resolutely white, middle-class activity, and a very visible way to mark that class identity” (21).

But *The Wide, Wide World* resists maternal authority, emphasizing the importance of paternal guidance as John Humphreys assumes authority over Ellen’s studies. When Ellen returns to America as John's wife, he furnishes a reading room for her that is attached to his study, where he will “pilot” her reading. It is interesting that while reading is associated with character formation in *The Wide, Wide World*, the novel also posits that one can become a better woman by not reading, as in the case where John forbids Ellen to read novels, reflecting the nineteenth century fear that novels would lead women into idleness and moral corruption.⁶ Were novels dangerous because they offered women a window through which to consider injustices against them? By highlighting suffering, novels questioned a society that consigned women to subordinate, self-sacrificing roles.

Since *The Wide, Wide World's* reemergence during the feminist recovery of women's writing, its gender politics have been debated. As in most sentimental novels, in *The Wide, Wide World* female submission is a social and religious imperative, but the cost of submission is clear in the novel's subtext. Jane Tompkins posits that Ellen learns a lesson in religious transcendence through suffering because by accepting suffering, she supplants patriarchal authority with divine authority, while Richard Brodhead posits that Ellen's submission reinforces patriarchy. Either way, female suffering is central to the novel's politics. While Warner's novel chronicles the journey of the Christian, it is also an expression of female subjectivity. The narrative's focus on Ellen's feelings grants authority to the powerless, and calls for a new form of patriarchal authority, while still acknowledging the dominance of that authority.

The Wide, Wide World appeals to critics because of its representation of mid nineteenth-century American culture. However, the heavy-handed treatment of religion and the copious biblical passages are tedious to modern readers. The excessive sentimentality is trying as well, with buckets of tears, guilt, sympathy, illness, and of course a "happy ending." *The Wide, Wide World* is ultimately a didactic, orphan-girl text that shows how a true Christian should live, but the subtext which chronicles the cost of female submission and the self-sacrifice demanded by domestic ideology makes it an interesting study for modern readers.

Reading into Identity: Ellen's Character Development

The novel, certainly a best-selling one, was a powerful tool and one of the few public avenues for a woman to express a political voice. I am particularly interested in Warner's treatment of female reading and education in relation to nationality, which is why it is fruitful to hold *The Wide, Wide World* up against *Villette*. Like Bronte, Warner asks what price must a woman pay for a place in the world, and how does the answer differ in a mid-century American novel versus a mid-century British novel? Ellen and Lucy are both orphans whose education is ultimately guided by male mentors who they love, but Lucy is deprived of marriage while Ellen finds herself, at the end of the novel, ensconced in an "idyllic" domestic space. While Ellen's reading and self-sacrifice is in the service of Christian principles with the ultimate goal of becoming an ideal woman on American soil, Lucy Snowe's reading is in the service of her professional goals, but for Lucy to live as an independent agent she is relegated to a life on foreign soil.

I believe that Warner's Presbyterianism is in large part responsible for Ellen's character development and the sociopolitical ideology that she embodies. *The Wide, Wide World* chronicles Ellen's coming of age during the religious fervor of the Second Great Awakening. Ellen develops into a domestic, Christian woman through reading select texts that she and her mentors individualize for her. Through reading, Ellen herself becomes an American text, and her community "reads" her behavior, enabling her evangelical mission to succeed. *The Wide, Wide World* is a product of the Protestant revivalism that swept across America in the first half of the nineteenth century. This movement was predicated on republican ideals of individualism, and a true Christian's

goal was to transform America by converting others to Christian principles, a practice at which Ellen excels. The novel's focus on reading, religion, and patriotism provides a framework to examine how women readers are themselves a site of transatlantic debate about proper womanhood.

Readers and texts shape each other, and the books that Ellen reads have national implications. Her most prized possessions are her little red King James Bible, a book of English hymns, and Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*.⁷ Why does she prize her books so much? She treasures her books because they recall the people who gave them to her, and these absent teachers influence Ellen through texts. Her Bible was a gift from her mother, her hymnbook was a gift from the minister, George Marshman, and her copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a gift from John Humphreys. Ellen's books are physical manifestations of important people in her life, and are a means of charting her journey from a lonely orphan child to an educated, fully developed Christian woman.

Listen to Your Mother: Reading with Maternal Guidance

Developing into such a woman was a hot topic in sentimental novels, and as Kate Flint writes in *The Woman Reader*: "Although the stress on religious motivation, on doing one's duty by God, becomes markedly less prominent throughout the period (at least in texts aimed at the middle classes) the overall tenor remains the same: that girls

⁷ Published in 1678, Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* was a dissenter's book, that later became a seminal text in American culture, encompassing the religious beliefs of the Puritans. For two centuries after its publication, Bunyan's narrative circulated among politically radical or devout segments of the middle classes. The book is discussed in the works of Susan Warner, Mark Twain and Louisa May Alcott among others.

are, in learning how to care for and present themselves, how to assist in the home, and how most profitably to occupy their leisure hours, in some way fitting themselves to be, eventually, good wives and mothers” (72). Domestic novels advance the theory that women (girls) have a character worth developing, but caution that “individualized subjecthood” must be developed within specific paradigms. One of these paradigms was a carefully guided course of reading, ideally supervised by a girl’s mother.⁸

The Wide, Wide World attempts to determine what is ideal womanhood, and mothers and mother figures define that ideal. Mothers model a conduct of reading that enables their daughters to internalize principles of feminine behavior. The first chapter of *The Wide, Wide World* draws an idealized portrait of Ellen and her mother comforting each other, and closes with Ellen reading the twenty-third psalm aloud, after which she laments, “If only I could feel these words as mamma does!” (15). The scripture reading calms the grieving Mrs. Montgomery, and resigns her to the pending separation from Ellen that her husband demands. Ashworth writes how “Mrs. Montgomery’s readerly interest in the midst of her grief reflects her reliance on the printed word, her ability to enter the text, inhabit it, and modify her behavior accordingly.” Ellen must learn to replicate this reading conduct.

To ensure that Ellen has access to a Bible, the dying Mrs. Montgomery takes Ellen shopping to purchase a Bible. The bookstore is full of choices, and Ellen is made euphoric by the smell. Ellen is at first tempted by children’s books, but is elated when her

⁸ Sarah Stickney Ellis wrote in *The Mothers of England* (1843): “in the choice of books to be read for the instruction or amusement of her daughters, a mother should always be consulted” (qtd. Flint 83). Ellis echoes an earlier sentiment from *The Mother’s Book* (1831), in which Lydia Maria Child states that “children, especially girls, should not read anything without a mother’s knowledge and sanction” (92).

mother asks for the Bibles. Ellen's decision making process indicates how important the right choice is, both nationally and religiously: “[Her] brow [was] grave with unusual care, as though a nation's fate were deciding, she was weighing the comparative advantages of large, small, and middle-sized; black, blue, purple, and red; gilt and not gilt; clasp and no clasp” (30). Mrs. Montgomery’s guidance demonstrates the impact of choosing the appropriate Bible. The first Bible that Ellen chooses is a large royal octavo gilt edition – too large and inappropriate for her future evangelical life because of its external trappings. Ellen's second choice is a two-volume pink Bible that will fit in her pocket, but Mrs. Montgomery points out that it will be difficult to read. Mrs. Montgomery narrows the choices to three options, and Ellen opts for the red Bible because it reminds her of her mother’s, an association that will serve as a material reminder of her mother when she is gone. Ellen’s new Bible becomes a tangible and spiritual tie to her mother. Mrs. Montgomery inscribes the Bible: “I will be a God to thee, and to thy seed after thee...Let these words be my memorial” (42). This Bible is not only an extension of her mother; when Ellen is in Scotland, she turns to her Bible to remember her friends in Thirwall: “It was her special delight to pray for those loved ones she could do nothing else for” (540). At the novel's conclusion, this Bible embodies everyone with whom Ellen has shared it with in her Christian community.

Alice Humphreys picks up where Mrs. Montgomery leaves off, acting as a surrogate mother who guides Ellen’s studies and models appropriate reading behavior. In one instance, Ellen asks Alice to help her interpret some hymns, and they choose one about the individual's “charge” to glorify God. Alice explains to Ellen that her duty is to

be “faithful, patient, [and] self-denying,” and goes on to explain the missionary calling that such behavior precipitates: “I have heard it said, Ellen, that Christians are the only Bible some people ever read” (240). In this statement, Alice charges Ellen to act as a text which others will read, and how she, in turn, can read the text to others. Alice is teaching Ellen how and what to read, as well as how to be a model Christian and ideal woman.

By “ideal woman,” the novel suggests that this is also a middle class woman. Ashworth writes that to “understand this bourgeois maternal legacy is to turn to the one mother figure in the novel who represents a counter-class culture. Ellen's agrarian Aunt Fortune refuses to mother her desire to read, and she has no use for the women within the middle-class sphere” (151). When Ellen asks her Aunt if she can continue her education, Aunt Fortune complains that “[I]t doesn't do for women to be bookworms... That's the way your mother was brought up... If she had been trained to use her hands and do something useful instead of thinking herself above it, maybe she wouldn't have had to go to sea for her health” (140). Aunt Fortune views reading as frivolous; the polar opposite of the genteel Alice Humphreys who calls her books “my greatest treasure” (164). The differences between Alice and Aunt Fortune highlight how reading is a middle-class activity, and a marker of that status.

Honor Thy Father: Ellen's Paternally Guided Reading

While *The Wide, Wide World* highlights the value of a mother's guidance of her daughter reader, the text, in fact, privileges paternal guidance. When Ellen takes the long steamboat ride to her Aunt Fortune's farm in upstate New York, a kind stranger who is

later revealed to be a friend of the Humphreys takes pity on Ellen and attempts to comfort her. George Marshman enters the text when he shares his hymnbook with Ellen, and they reflect on God. The first hymn they consider is “Behold the Saviour at thy Door,” by Isaac Watts, a hymn chosen to foster Ellen’s religious conversion. The last stanza reads:

Open my heart, Lord enter in;
Slay every foe, and conquer sin.
Here now to thee I all resign—
My body, soul, and all are thine. (75)

Through this hymn, Mr. Marshman models behavior and reading skills that Ellen will utilize in her missionary work. George gives Ellen the hymnbook before she disembarks, explaining: “I am going to give you this . . . that it may remind you of what we have talked of to-day” (78). The hymnbook bears Mr. Marshman’s markings, so like her Bible, this new text physically embodies its giver and acts as a comfort and guide for Ellen in her difficult journey from home.

While Mr. Marshman is Ellen’s first encounter with a paternal reader, it is John Humphreys whose presence is the most influential in constructing Ellen’s character. When John is home, his teaching trumps his sister’s authority over Ellen’s education, and his surveillance and direction controls both her body and her mind. In a much more direct way than Lucy Snowe’s tutelage under M. Paul, *The Wide, Wide World* “portrays what remains latent in the advice manual: women read within a highly eroticized body, a body that must be regulated within a heterosexual power structure” (Ashworth 147). John selects Ellen’s reading materials, bans fiction, coaches her elocution, and demands that she provide interpretations of her readings. Ellen’s total submission to John confirms his

authority, and “In her eagerness to please and satisfy her teacher, her whole soul was given to the performance of whatever he wished her to do” (351). The woman reader reads entirely under the approval of paternal authority.

Ellen is often asked to read aloud under John’s direction as he “manages” her: “every day made her read aloud to him... He taught her how to manage her voice and how to manage the language” (464). Reading aloud to one’s family was an important charge of a republican mother’s nation-building duty. Doing so epitomized appropriate reading conduct and located women’s reading in the domestic space, stripping it of autonomy. Kate Flint asserts that such practice “would necessarily check the dangerous delights of solitary reading; was believed to aid family unity, and – as many autobiographies testified was indeed the case – served to introduce children to valued works of literature” (100).

In addition to literary works, women were also encouraged to “read within, to read at fixed intervals, to refer to dictionaries and atlases, to underline important passages, and, above all, to read slowly, deliberately, and repeatedly” (Ashworth 147). Under John’s direction, Ellen closely reads a variety of appropriate texts, including *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the Bible, and Wiems’s *Life of Washington*, which “was read, and read, and read over again, till she almost knew it by heart” (335). Ellen’s secular reading is of particular interest, because as Flint argues, literature “could also be studied in conjunction with the history of the language... which could be used to impart a sense of both national identity and continuity” (133). Like her choice of the right Bible, right reading also bears national implications.

Reading the right books was not the only task of the woman reader – she also was expected to correctly interpret texts. The genres most suitable for women (in addition to devotional texts), were history, philosophy, biography, and geography, and Ellen’s reading in these genres represents how to properly read secular texts. When Ellen reads a biography of the British Admiral Horatio Nelson, she expresses her admiration of Nelson to John and asks if he agrees, to which John replies: “as well as I can like a man of very fine qualities without principle” (478).⁹ He instructs Ellen to reread the book with “a more critical eye” (478). Ellen later reassess her opinion of Nelson, and tells her Scottish Uncle that “I don't think, sir, I ought to like a man merely for being great unless he was good” (516). In this way, John teaches Ellen to interpret people’s acts from a Christian viewpoint. Through the two biographies he has Ellen read he not only makes a moral point, he also compares an American hero to a British hero. In contrast to Nelson, Washington is deemed to be a model of morality. John is training Ellen to use texts to interpret her world, and to use her education to correctly interpret texts.

In the novel, John is most closely associated with Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. John personalizes this book for Ellen by reading from it every night: “Every evening while he was at home they spent an hour with the ‘Pilgrim’” (351). Ellen is captivated by John’s voice during these readings, as “she devoured every word that fell from the reader's lips” (351). When John sends Ellen a copy of the book as a gift, inscribing it with the note “To my little sister Ellen Montgomery,” it solidifies their bond.

⁹ Horatio Nelson is a hero in British naval history. Nelson was knighted in 1797 and made viscount in 1801. In 1799 he began a notorious affair with Lady Emma Hamilton. He separated from his wife in 1801, and that same year, Lady Hamilton bore Nelson a daughter. Nelson's most famous victory was his last. In 1805, he defeated Napoleon’s fleet at Trafalgar, but was mortally wounded on his ship *HMS Victory*.

John has made copious annotations in the text, further personalizing it, making it more “American,” and increasing Ellen’s sentimental attachment to the book: “She counted it her greatest treasure next to her little red Bible” (370).

John’s tight control over Ellen’s studies is emphasized by his dominant presence, and reading is a mechanism of physical and emotional control. One evening, John interrupts Ellen’s reading, saying, “Too late for you, Ellie,” but Ellen forgets her promise to stop reading in “two minutes” and “The two minutes were not ended, when a hand came between her and the page and quietly drew the book away” (476). John’s confiscation of her book is a physical manifestation of his paternal authority, but Ellen’s attraction to him makes his discipline easy to bear because she understands that he is acting out of love.

Part of John’s loving mission also entails banning certain reading, and *The Wide, Wide World* posits that sometimes the route to ideal womanhood is by not reading when that reading is self-indulgent. In one scene: “Ellen was reading, comfortably ensconced in the corner of the wide sofa” when the housekeeper, Margery, brings in a letter which Anthony Fox, a “poor Irishman,” has asked Ellen to help him write (462). Ellen refuses and returns to her book when John answers: “Ellen will do it” (462). Ellen is ashamed and completes the task immediately. When John asks her if she needs to eliminate some of her studies, she replies, “I was not studying at all -- I was just amusing myself with a book -- I was only selfish and lazy” (463). In this scene, Ellen does not exemplify ideal womanhood, and reading is represented as a self-interested activity, but with John’s help Ellen corrects her mistake. In this case, Ellen represents women reading improperly,

specifically fiction and novels. But Ellen does not read novels, and while she does get lost in the text, she reads with purpose. Her pleasure lies in a text's ability to instruct, as when "two or three new English periodicals, which John sent for on purpose for her, were mines of pleasure to Ellen...[there] was no fiction in them...they were as full of instruction as of interest" (464). Fortunately, Ellen does not want to read fiction.

Ellen's ideality as a reader is the product of learning to conquer her own desires. Jane Tompkins argues in *Sensational Designs* that this may be construed as an act of autonomy, or as an autonomous act performed in the service of God, meaning, that by "conquering herself in the name of the highest possible authority, the dutiful woman merges her own authority with God's" (162). Flint states that "Such a point is easily linked with the way in which the most significant reading material alluded to in Warner's novel, the Bible, is employed as a gift from mother to daughter: a reminder of a mother's love and teachings; a transmission of spiritual power, and an acknowledgment of a shared recognition that woman's earthly submission is ultimately what will lead her to a position of celestial power." (207). Such submission requires that a woman practice self-censorship. Ellen is forbidden by John to read fiction, and when he returns to school, she respects his wishes and reads no fiction.

Reading and National Identity: Warner's Little Republican

Ellen's devotional and secular reading has molded her into a proud American and a model Christian. When her Scottish Uncle Lindsay calls her patriotism into question asking, "And pray, are all the American children as strong republicans as yourself?"

Ellen replies, “I hope so” (515). The reading woman was in training to become an ideal Republican mother, and to exemplify the features that defined that role: selflessness, morality, and piety. The Republican mother was also middle class, and in *The Wide, Wide World*, reading is not only a mechanism for self-improvement, but a means of raising up the lower classes to middle class standards of conduct. Ellen’s religious reading enabled her to wage a two pronged attack – one attack to elevate non-believers to middle-class American standards, and a second attack against her Scottish relations to maintain her religious and national identity.

In her first attack, Ellen uses religious texts to convert lower class citizens in her farming community. But while the texts matter, it is the manner in which Ellen’s exemplifies their message that inspires her converts to embrace Christianity. Ellen’s first convert is the kind, Dutch farmer Mr. Van Brunt who visits Ellen after she falls ill in a snowstorm. From her sickbed, Ellen asks Mr. Van Brunt to read from her hymnbook. He selects a hymn about Jesus bringing his sheep into his fold, but under Ellen’s questioning, Mr. Van Brunt admits that he is not one of the sheep. Upon hearing this, Ellen cries and a tear falls on his palm. This small tear begins Mr. Van Brunt’s conversion. Later, when Mr. Van Brunt breaks his leg after a fall, Ellen visits him daily and reads passages that she has selected from *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the Bible. At novel’s end, Mr. Van Brunt is one of the most devout Christians in the community.

Nancy Vawse is another of Ellen’s converts. Nancy is a wild, country girl without manners or morals who is cruel to Ellen from the minute she arrives in Thirwall. Ellen believes that if Nancy reads from the Bible, she will become a domesticated, Christian

woman. When Ellen gives Nancy a Bible, Nancy asks why, and Ellen responds with Christian kindness: “I thought it would be the best thing, -- if you would only read it, -- it would make you so happy and good” (333). Later in the novel, when Aunt Fortune excludes Nancy from an apple harvesting event, Ellen asks Mr. Van Brunt to intercede on Nancy’s behalf, and Ellen’s kindness inspires Nancy to accept her Bible. These acts Ellen performs as a child foreshadow her mission work as an adult. Ellen has learned how textual engagements can aid her missionary work, tying Christian principles and reading practices to developing America’s middle class.

While Ellen’s reading works to strengthen America from within, her patriotism receives more critical attention once she leaves America. Her rebellion at the end of novel against her aristocratic Scottish relatives is about the power of reading as a political act. Ellen’s Uncle, Mr. Lindsay exercises authority over Ellen, and their difficult relationship revolves heavily around Ellen’s reading. When Ellen is sent to Scotland to fill her mother’s place in her grandmother's home, she becomes the “darling possession – a dear plaything” of her grandmother, her aunt, and her uncle (538). As she does John Humphreys, Ellen loves her Uncle Lindsay, and like John, her Uncle controls her reading, declaring to Ellen, “you are my own little daughter, and must do precisely what I tell you” (510). In Scotland, Ellen must fight to read, and must defend America in political discussions by employing her cache of knowledge gained from right reading.

Because Warner was Presbyterian and Scotland is identified with political resistance, Scotland is a logical choice in which to locate Ellen’s defense of her country and religious principles. Her mother’s family, the Lindsays, represent the decaying

British Empire, as all of Mr. Lindsay's sons are dead, and other family members have immigrated to America. The Lindsays loathe America, and want Ellen to abandon all ties to her life there. They attempt to accomplish this by controlling her education, her religious practices, and her reading.

The Lindsays represent an aristocratic model that values women for their genteel qualities, not for their intellect. In Scotland, Ellen is treated like a small child, not like a curious, intellectual young woman, and her core values are constantly under attack. For example, when her aunt, Lady Keith tries to assess Ellen's accomplishments, she asks Ellen what she has been trained to sing. When Ellen responds that she sings hymns, Lady Keith inquires, "Can you sing nothing but hymns?", and Ellen playfully replies, "Yes ma'am...I can sing, 'Hail Columbia!'" (508). Lady Keith expresses her hope that Ellen will "never salute *my* ears with your American ditty" (508). Scenes like this in conjunction with the Lindsay's approach to Ellen's education stand in opposition to the intellectual progress Ellen enjoys in America. John and Alice have challenged Ellen with religious and secular reading, and encouraged her to make informed interpretations about texts and their meaning. In Scotland, when she asks a question, "She was kissed and laughed at... and dismissed with no light on the subject" (539). Ellen's predicament recalls Hope Leslie's statement to Everell that American women enjoy a freedom to pursue intellectual undertakings that British women do not experience.

In addition to limiting her education, the Lindsays attempt to control Ellen's religious fervor and American ties by limiting her reading. Mr. Lindsay regulates Ellen's reading in an effort to make her "forget that [she was] American" (510). Ashworth points

out how “As Ellen struggles to retain her right to read, the conduct of women's reading becomes a discretely American code of behavior; its viability depends on a sacred democratic sociopolitical system” (157). But Uncle Lindsay claims literally to own Ellen, and their unequal relationship recalls the absolute authority of the aristocratic model. To hobble her patriotism and religious devotion, the Lindsays take away Ellen’s “greatest comfort” - her hour of solitude during which she connects with her old friends through her Bible. When her grandmother forces her to abandon this hour of prayer, Ellen defies her, crying, “I *must* have that hour,” and she takes up the matter with her Uncle who reinstates her privileges (542). This act of rebellion resembles that of her Revolutionary War heroes, and the Lindsay’s effort to undermine Ellen’s national and religious ties is an act of oppression. Ellen's rebellion has roots in American’s republican precedents.

While Uncle Lindsay helps Ellen in this instance, he will ultimately, like John Humphreys, physically remove books from her possession. When he discovers that Ellen has been reading *The Pilgrim's Progress* to the housekeeper, he takes “the book she still held” and leaves the room (551). Mr. Lindsay is upset because this text recalls for Ellen her life in America, and because it was a gift from John. However, Mr. Lindsay can barely identify the text itself, and confesses to his mother, “I hardly know [what the book is]...except it is from that person that seems to have obtained such an ascendancy [sic] over her -- it is full of his notes” (551). Through his association with the book, John has “Americanized” this seminal English text. When Ellen argues that the book is hers, her Uncle reminds her that “you are mine” (553). Ellen is herself a possession, and as such, has no right to her own property. While women read under the surveillance of authority

on both continents, in Scotland, Ellen must fight to read to maintain her identity. To earn back her treasured copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Ellen throws herself upon Lindsay's mercy. Her reading time is restored, but is threatened by a new rash of social obligations. Under her Uncle's harsh gaze, Ellen confronts a more despotic nature of male censorship.

Ashworth writes that "To regulate a woman's reading was to regulate the woman...a woman is what and how she reads" (157). In insisting on her right to read and her right to possess texts, Ellen defies proper female conduct and bucks the ideology that confined and surveyed women's reading habits within the domestic space. In doing so, she asserts her American identity. Ellen begins this process when she debates the American Revolution with her Uncle, who accuses Americans of forfeiting "good character" in their revolt, to which Ellen replies, "it was King George's fault, uncle; he and the English forfeited their characters first" (506). Ellen bases her opinion on readings from "Two lives of Washington, and some in the Annual Register, and part of Graham's United States; and one or two other things" (506). Reading has developed her character and her mind, and she is crystal clear about her patriotism. Unfortunately, a defense of the American Revolution is where Ellen's personal revolution must end. Just as democracy is not truly available to American women, under her Uncle's authority, Ellen really has no freedom at all. The ideal woman reader must embody the tenets of ideal womanhood, and as such, her political and religious beliefs are subordinated to the patriarchal domestic model.

In the final, unpublished chapter, Ellen and John marry and return to America. While Ellen returns to the seat of her reading, circumstances have changed. Reading

remains a sanctioned activity, and John provides Ellen with a private room...a chamber filled with “the appliances of comfort and ease and literary and studious wants” (574). However, the room is hardly private – it is attached to John’s study, and he will “pilot” her reading (577). Ellen has regained the time and space to read, and back in America, she will once again embody the ideal woman reader. However, in the original ending, the woman reader does not enjoy the opportunity to inhabit a new reading space – the ending is simply that “she went back to spend her life with the friends and guardians she best loved” (569). The original ending concludes with a vision of Ellen as an ideal wife and daughter, not a reader. While the unpublished ending leaves us with the vision of Ellen as a reader, albeit a highly supervised one, unlike Lucy Snowe, both endings ensconce Ellen in a loving, domestic environment on her home soil.

Where Do Brontë and Warner Diverge?

Janet Todd has argued that “Literature inevitably colludes with ideology... and it can expose and criticize as well as repeat” (86). If we accept the premise that novels are political products of their culture, and that this relationship is symbiotic, then it stands to reason that politics are in turn influenced by literature. Texts imparted the woman reader with an awareness of what Flint terms “the sensations of difference and of similarity,” and the choices she made while reading such as “where to differ, where to acknowledge a bond” were political (30). But how to make good choices? Flint argues that the novel was dangerous owing to its ability to make readers reconsider their positions within their homes and within society, as nineteenth-century women writers “invited their readers to

join in a process which involved the active construction of meaning, rather than its revelation” (278). *The Wide, Wide World* and *Villette* invite readers to consider their social, cultural and national circumstance, and decide how to internalize (by accepting or rejecting) these building blocks to construct their own identities. Politics, history, and literature are indeed intertwined, but when national and political ideologies differ, the elements that “construct” the woman writer (as well as her readers) shift. This is where the value of a transatlantic consideration lies.

To consider the woman reader’s role in history, I examine the relationship between reading, the construction of the womanly ideal, and women’s struggle for independence. By juxtaposing representations of British and American women readers, it becomes evident how authors represent gender ideals differently, and differ on whether their heroines embrace such roles. *The Wide, Wide World* and *Villette* complicate the mid-century view of women’s reading and domesticity, and how these elements impact ideas of nation. Both Ellen and Lucy call upon texts to become independent thinkers, enabling them to survive and influence others, but with a different end result. Brontë ultimately champions a utilitarian purpose for women’s reading, and offers a scathing critique of British society. Warner, however, champions reading as a moral foundation for raising strong patriots whose reading reinforces domestic ideals that will strengthen the nation, but in the end, the autonomous woman reader must put down her books.

Like their English counterparts, most nineteenth-century American authors were middle-class women who wrote to earn a living, and in their novels advocated positions on social, religious, and political topics. Considering their authorship, it is not surprising

that most fictional heroines during this period were avid readers. Nina Baym notes that “women authors saw cultivation of the mind as the great key to freedom, the means by which women, learning to think about their situation, could learn how to master it” (“American” 31). As the seduction novel gave way to “woman’s fiction,” American fiction developed indigenously and is replete with commentary on republicanism, expressing the hope that sentimental writing could promote civic stability. Authors encouraged women to embrace the opportunity that history was giving them – to embody American domestic values in their capacity as wives and mothers.

Warner’s novel promotes guided reading as a means to foster moral improvement, Christian principles and national pride. When Ellen is sent to Scotland, she is expected to surrender her patriotic and religious beliefs, but her strong foundation enables her to retain her faith and her American identity – which she considers to be her rights. When early feminists cited the *Declaration of Independence* and demanded their “natural rights,” they demanded the freedom to publicly participate in their society by exposing its contradictions. One way *The Wide, Wide World* exposes such contradictions is by challenging the domestic model of the “angel in the house.” Sentimental portraits of mothers were used in Victorian literature as a symbol for nation, keeping women focused on the home so men stayed focused on public affairs. *The Wide, Wide World* rejects this vision of motherhood when Ellen’s mother readers die, in effect, challenging the stability of nation. An educated, patriotic American wife is the Captain needed to right the ship.

While *The Wide, Wide World* certainly champions the potential of the woman reader, it also illustrates how reading must be regulated – there are limits. Women readers

positioning themselves to serve as middle class, republican mothers were preparing for a public role, developing in their children a strong national identity. As Maria Sanchez argues, “the ‘domestic’ and ‘public,’ even as they were transformed into imagined oppositional spheres, remained conjoined in certain aspects” (169). Nina Baym argues that because “the home was where the most important national product – the citizen- was manufactured; the domestic sphere was thus a work site fully participant in public life” (“American” 12). Through her reading, Ellen has been molded into a model, middle class American, but ironically, ideal reading is ultimately subordinate to ideal femininity, and when Ellen’s autonomy as a reader becomes a threat to patriarchal authority and nation, she must relinquish her books.

Like the tension Warner describes between Americans and the Scots, in *Villette*, Brontë offers both an historical and a social commentary on the relationship between Britain and continental Europe in the mid nineteenth-century. Napoleon was defeated in 1815, but Waterloo was part of the collective memory and in Lucy’s frequent comparisons of M. Paul to Napoleon Bonaparte, the tension between the English and the Europeans is clear. M. Paul harshly abuses the English, causing Lucy to remark “it is curious to discover how these clowns of Labassecour secretly hate England” (379). Lucy is also guilty of xenophobia, claiming that her students are liars, and are incapable to the work ethic she would demand from an English student. And while “equality” is “much practiced,” Lucy claims that the Labassecourians prefer Napoleonic despotism (90). Women in *Villette* are under constant surveillance, and Lucy asserts that they “liked the pressure of a firm heel” (92).

Women's roles are also scrutinized in *Villette*, in its critiques of the mid-century ideology that a woman's role was in the home. Lucy reacts with derision to the painting "La vie d'une femme," which depicts the life of a woman in its images of a pious daughter, a devoted wife and mother, and a devout widow. Lucy needs her work to stay sane, and describes the happiest years of her life as those spent building her school. Through Lucy, Brontë examines the plight of the spinster, regarded as a superfluous woman in British society. As an impoverished single woman, Lucy is often overlooked by her friends, and fears being forgotten. Women who found themselves in such circumstances were forced to seek employment with few options available to them. Marriage was the usual destiny for women, but even a married woman in mid-century Britain was her husband's property and enjoyed almost no legal rights, including rights to her own property, her children, or the right to vote. Charlotte Brontë was familiar with the limited opportunities available to women, and *Villette* offers a critique of both the condition of women, and the oppressive social system that enables their plight. Through Lucy, Brontë shows her readers that an intellectual, self-respecting woman can find a place in the world, although she may have to leave England to do so. *Villette's* foreign setting and Lucy's intellectual authority enable her to move past the limited opportunities available to women in England.

While scholars continue to analyze the cultural work that domestic fictions performed, feminist scholars often underscore its subversive possibilities. In this chapter, I have considered the correlation between constructions of the woman reader and the construction of a sense of gender, class and nation. An investigation of women's reading

in *The Wide, Wide World* and *Villette* elucidates the social and political uses of women's reading, and the possibilities that such reading creates for constructing both personal and national identities. In the nineteenth-century, novels were tools of cultural transmission, and as *The Literary World* stated in 1850, "The novel is now almost recognized with the newspaper and pamphlet as a legitimate mode of influencing public opinion" (qtd. in Baym 214). While some novels supported contemporary ideas about womanhood, others relayed a more subversive message. Could a nation flourish when half of its citizens were essentially powerless?

Ideas of powerlessness and a lack of meaningful opportunities continue in Chapter Five, where I consider the effects of reading in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife*, and Louisa May Alcott's *Work*. In these novels, contradictions between the domestic ideal and the impulse toward social reform become clear as their heroines read their way into becoming critical thinkers and useful citizens. In *Work*, Alcott explores how reading shapes character through the conflict between female independence and domesticity during the American Civil War years. Likewise, in *The Doctor's Wife*, Braddon uses reading to chart its heroine's moral evolution as it considers issues of education, employment and the limits of domesticity. Like Lucy Snowe and Hope Leslie before them, Isabel Gilbert in *The Doctor's Wife* and Christie Devon in *Work* are products of their social circumstances, but in these later novels the stakes have changed, and both heroines learn to utilize their moral impulses, personal strengths and economic means to make tangible social reforms. When upper class romance has worn thin and

war has created new ideas about freedom, the heroines of these novels recognize the need for change and opportunities to be useful agents for social change.

Like *Villette*, *The Doctor's Wife* occurs during a tumultuous time in England after the Second Reform Bill almost doubled the electorate, repeal of Corn Laws wreaked havoc on the agricultural laborer, and England continued to suffer from a "surplus" of single women. The ramifications of these events impacted all members of society, but in contrast to Bronte's bleak suggestion that women's survival and self-actualization required drastic measures such as emigration and a surrender of the social self, Braddon's solution is to educate women and provide them meaningful opportunities within their own homes and in society. *The Doctor's Wife* charts the unhappiness of a middle-class woman, Isabel Gilbert, who feels trapped in her marriage with no real purpose and whose addiction to romance novels has made her unfit for domestic life. *The Doctor's Wife* is a scathing commentary on middle class domesticity and a warning that when women are denied intellectual stimulation and meaningful work, they risk devolving into a state of fantasy. However, in Isabel's case reading also fosters self-improvement and when she moves beyond romances to 'graver books' and learns to put her imagination to good use, her meaningful reforms, personally and socially, represent a compromise between upper and middle class values that can stabilize England's fractured state.

Work scrutinizes and ultimately subscribes to a version of the domestic ideal as its reformer heroine, Christie Devon, assumes a position of authority within her sorority of women. I chose *Work* because it takes reform several steps further than *The Wide, Wide World*. Because of her youth and environment, Ellen Montgomery's reform efforts are

limited to her evangelical practices. Christie, on the other hand, has lived several lives, lost a husband to war, borne a child, and befriended a diverse community of women who she will lead in a quest for radical social and political changes. Christie's story is an appeal to women who "are driven by necessity, temperament, or principle out into the world," but when Christie's efforts to live independently fail, she turns to religion and reading to rescue herself. Alcott grounds her hope for a better America in the home, but suggests that a more inclusive form of domesticity spearheaded by rational, intelligent women is necessary to create a nation that nurtures all of its members. *Work* is unique because it was started before the Civil War and completed afterwards, and Nina Baym notes that "the liberal women who began their writing careers after the Civil War found the redemptive possibilities of enlightened domesticity to be no longer credible" ("Woman's" 50). *Work* begins as a challenge to domesticity and ends with a 'league of sisters' joined in the hope that "the coming generation of women will not only receive but deserve their liberty, by learning that the greatest of God's gifts to us is the privilege of sharing His great work" (344).

CHAPTER V

REFORM THE WOMAN, REFORM THE NATION: MARY ELIZABETH BRADDON'S *THE DOCTOR'S WIFE* AND LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S *WORK*

In this chapter, I consider domesticity and reform through the lens of reading, interrogating the conflict between assuming a traditional domestic role and experiencing new possibilities made available by war, wealth, and widowhood. In *Work* (1873), Louisa May Alcott explores how reading shapes character through the conflict between independence and the need for community during the American Civil War years. Likewise, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's sensation novel, *The Doctor's Wife* (1864), uses reading to chart its heroine's moral evolution as it considers issues of education, employment and domesticity, albeit during a time of prosperity and stability in England. Both texts highlight issues of gender, class, and reform, but Alcott's American text imagines more progressive possibilities for women than Braddon's novel envisions for 1860's Midlands.

Postbellum America experienced concerns about the materialistic and secular tendencies of the age, and sentimental writers used domesticity as a counterweight to such concerns. *Work* scrutinizes, challenges, and ultimately subscribes to a version of the domestic ideal, as its reformer heroine, Christie Devon, assumes a position of authority within her sorority of women. Women's reform was advancing rapidly over the time period Alcott was writing *Work*. The Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 had produced the

manifesto, “A Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions” which set the agenda for the ensuing women's rights movement. Additional advancements included the founding of the American Equal Rights Association in 1866, publication of “The Revolution” by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan Anthony in 1868, the ratification of the of the 15th Amendment which stated that women are not specifically excluded from the vote in 1870, and Congress awarding women federal employees equal pay for equal work in 1872. Christie’s story is one of work and reform; an appeal to independent women who “are driven by necessity, temperament, or principle out into the world” (“Work” 11). Christie tries to live independently, but in despair, turns to religion and reading to make sense of her role. The novel ends with Christie as a rational woman, stripped of her romantic imagination, the voice for a community of women. Alcott confines her hope for a better world to the domestic sphere, but not to the traditional interpretation of that sphere. Alcott suggests that a more inclusive domestic ideal led by rational, intelligent, reform-minded women is necessary to create a nation that nurtures all of its citizens.

Unlike Alcott’s novel, *The Doctor’s Wife* charts the unhappiness of a married, middle-class woman, Isabel Gilbert, who feels trapped in her marriage with no real purpose and whose addiction to romance novels has made her unfit for domestic life. A kind but dull country doctor falls in love with Isabel, a girl with a limited education who finds her life “vulgar and commonplace...She wanted her life to be like her books” (Braddon 28). After they marry, Isabel is almost seduced by Roland Lansdell, the local squire and amateur poet. When both her husband and suitor die, Isabel is left a wealthy woman and becomes an excellent manager of her estate, having “transformed a

sentimental girl into a good and noble woman” (Braddon 403). *The Doctor’s Wife* is a critique of the condition of women in mid-century England. During the nineteenth-century, women writers viewed the condition of women as an index of other social issues, including poverty and labor concerns, all of which Braddon addresses in her novel. By the 1860’s, an organized feminist movement was in place in response to the limitations of the “domestic angel” ideal advocated by writers such as Eliza Lynn Linton and, Sarah Stickney Ellis. Feminists advocated for voting rights, health, education, and legal reform for women. Isabel’s local actions mirror Christie’s more ambitious political aims as she uses her new knowledge, faith, and resources to enact reforms to improve conditions in her immediate community and find a purpose for herself.

Changing Times in England

I first want to consider the role of reading in *The Doctor’s Wife*. To answer the question: “What type of young ladies are we trying to raise?” through the lens of women reading in novels, it is important to understand the historical context of those novels. *The Doctor’s Wife* was published in 1864, a transformative decade in England. After the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and the Crimean War in 1853-1856, England was now concerned about repercussions from the American Civil War. The Reform Act of 1867 loomed ahead, and the repeal of Corn Laws was wreaking havoc on the agricultural laborer. In addition, single women were beginning to outnumber men - by 1860 there were nearly three million single women in England. To compound this problem, these women had

virtually no jobs available to them. As a result, the 1860's saw many reforms aimed at securing more rights for laborers and women.

Married women suffered as well. Despite their idealized domestic roles, many women were mistreated by husbands who enjoyed legal rights to their wives' property, money, and children. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 helped, but it was not until 1870 when the Married Women's Property Act became law that married women were able to retain the assets they possessed before marriage. By the 1870's, women also gained greater employment rights. Universities began to admit women in the 1860's, and the first professional women began their careers in the 1870's. Of course there were critics, such as John Ruskin, who feared that women who worked outside the home would abandon their domestic obligations. However, feminists such as Harriet Martineau argued that women's greatest obstacle was "the jealousy of men in regard to the industrial independence of women" (329).

The appearance of the sensation novel was a response to legal and social issues affecting women. When women were granted expanded educational and employment rights in the 1870's, the popularity of the sensation novel waned. Contemporary objections to the sensation novel centered on its portrayal of women, as Margaret Oliphant, the most outspoken critic of the sensation novelists, wrote in *Blackwood's Magazine*: "Writers who have no genius and little talent, make up for it by displaying their acquaintance with the accessories and surroundings of vice" (258). The heroines of sensation novels do suffer from dangerous passions and commit crimes, but they are not the evil villains that ran rampant through the pages of their gothic and romantic

predecessors. In the 1860's, crime literature was scorned by critics, and only a few writers such as Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens wrote crime novels for the middle classes. Mary Elizabeth Braddon added to this genre anti-domestic heroines and used the sensation novel to make money as well social commentaries about the poor condition of women in England.

M.E. Braddon and the Sensation Novel¹

In spite of their popularity with readers, sensation novels were condemned for their depiction of crimes, infidelity, and lower class values. These novels did not limit criminal behavior to the lower class – they suggested that crime exists at all social levels. Critics also objected to the independent female characters in sensation novels. Braddon was the most sensational of these novelists, both in her personal life and in her writing, and was so closely associated with the genre that in 1865, W. Fraser Rae wrote in the *North British Review* that: “she is a slave, as it were, to the style which she created. ‘Sensation’ is her Frankenstein” (101).² Lyn Pykett suggests this comment highlights

¹ Braddon has received critical attention for her most famous novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, which contributed to the rise of the sensation genre in the 1860s and positioned her as “queen of the circulating libraries.” Her work was so popular that nine printings of *Lady Audley's Secret* were published in its first three months. The novel's engagement with topics ranging from bigamy and murder to madness and the limitations of Victorian femininity has readings by feminist critics including Pamela K. Gilbert, Ann Cvetkovich, and Kate Flint.

² Mary Elizabeth Braddon was born in 1835 in London to solicitor Henry Braddon and his Irish wife, Fanny White Braddon. Braddon became an actress at the age of nineteen, but retired after six years to write. Her first novel, *Three Times Dead*, was published in 1860. That same year, Braddon met the Irish publisher John Maxwell and they lived together despite the fact that he was already married. Although his first wife was institutionalized, he could not legally marry Braddon. However, Maxwell and Braddon had six children and were able to marry in 1874.

concern about the genre as “either a hybrid, unclean, or monstrous form of fiction, and also as a fiction without boundaries” (vii). However, Braddon’s fiction runs deeper than “sensation,” and in his biography, *Sensational Victorian: The Life and Times of Mary Elizabeth Braddon* (1979), Robert Lee Wolff notes the social critiques of the aristocracy in Braddon’s work, showing her to be politically radical, although not revolutionary.

In her Introduction to *The Doctor’s Wife*, Pykett points out that “Elaine Showalter was one of the first feminist critics to appropriate Braddon’s work as an example of subversive, radical, feminist critique, detecting in the sound of the rapidly turning pages...evidence of ‘a broader female discontent with the institutions of family life’” (xxii). Sensation novels were considered a serious threat to young, impressionable readers, and according to Kate Flint, “this fiction’s most disruptive potential lay ...in the degree to which it made its woman readers consider their positions within their own homes and within society” (277).

Braddon was known as a writer of popular sensation novels, but *The Doctor’s Wife*, a retelling of Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857), is an effort to produce a more literary novel. Braddon stated that *The Doctor’s Wife* was a change of direction for her, “a kind of turning point in my life, on the issue of which it must depend whether I sink or swim” (Wolff 164). For modern critics, one of the most intriguing elements of *The Doctor’s Wife* is one of its characters, Sigismund Smith, who is a writer of “highly-spiced fictions, which enjoyed an immense popularity amongst the classes who like their

literature as they like their tobacco--very strong” (Braddon 11).³ Smith's career, like Braddon's, progresses from penny bloods to three-volume novels, and like Braddon, he freely borrows from other authors, stating: “[T]he next best thing you can do if you haven't got ideas of your own . . . is to steal other people's ideas” (Braddon 45). Narin Hassan writes that “Smith's burden of producing novels for the consumption of the masses directly invokes the nature of Braddon's own fiction, and the critiques it inspired” (69).

Braddon uses Smith as her authorial mouthpiece to engage in the debate about the “dangerous” effects of sensation fiction.⁴ As Pykett points out, Smith offers “several examples of the excesses of which he writes but repeatedly denies that there is direct link . . . between reading about passionate deeds and crimes, and committing them” (xi). Sigismund Smith does not confuse fiction with reality, but Isabel Sleaford is completely addicted to the fantasy lives in novels. Sigismund confides to his friend and Isabel's future husband, George Gilbert, that she reads too many novels: “No wise man or woman was ever the worse for reading novels. Novels are only dangerous for those poor foolish girls who read nothing else” (Braddon 30). Braddon seems to suggest that the “danger” lies not in the novels themselves, but in their readers.

³ Braddon wrote to her mentor, Bulwer Lytton of her own “penny bloods”: “The amount of crime, treachery, murder, slow poisoning, & general infamy required by the Half penny reader is something terrible.”

⁴ The announcement that, “this is *not* a sensation novel” (358) reflects Braddon's self-reflexive attitude about the her writing and its reception, and Sigismund Smith is a voice for her position as a writer: “He had his ambition, which was to write a great novel; and the archetype of this magnum opus was the dream which he carried about him wherever he went, and fondly nursed by night and day. In the mean time, he wrote for his public, which was a public that bought its literature in the same manner as its pudding--in penny slices” (11-12).

In *The Doctor's Wife*, Braddon issues a warning to young women about the dangers of uncritical, unchecked reading, and a warning to England about the dangers of poorly educating its daughters and conscripting them to confined, middle-class lives with few meaningful intellectual outlets or public activity. George Gilbert, a respectable but dull country doctor visits his friend, hack-novelist Sigismund Smith, who boards with the Sleaford family. Here, George meets Isabel Sleaford, a flighty, beautiful young woman who obsessively reads romance novels. George falls in love with her, but the Sleafords mysteriously leave town. Years later, when Isabel contacts Smith seeking a governess position, he places her with a relative, Mr. Raymond, who is George Gilbert's neighbor. After their reunion, George proposes marriage and Isabel accepts, imagining marriage will be an escape from her mundane life, but she quickly learns that the marriage is not like romance novels, when during their honeymoon they have "very little to say to each other" (Braddon 107). When Isabel meets the local squire, Roland Lansdell, a wealthy, dashing poet, she falls immediately in love and they engage in a relationship based on sharing books. It is not until Lansdell almost seduces Isabel into leaving her husband and becoming his mistress that she realizes her own naiveté. They part and Isabel attempts to be a better wife, just in time for her husband's death from typhoid. Meanwhile, Lansdell is killed in an argument with his nemesis who turns out to be Isabel's criminal father. Despite all, Lansdell bequeaths the bulk of his fortune to Isabel, freeing her from dependence upon others.

Braddon published *The Doctor's Wife* before *Madame Bovary* was translated into English, but she was aware of the scandal Flaubert's novel had produced in France. *The*

Doctor's Wife is clearly based on Flaubert's tale in its focus on the escapades of the wife of a provincial doctor. Like *Madame Bovary*, *The Doctor's Wife* charts the unhappiness of a middle-class woman who feels trapped with no real "work." Emma and Isabel also share a reading problem. Isabel's addiction to romance novels has made her unfit for domestic life, but while Emma Bovary is ruined by the romances she reads, Isabel moves beyond romances to "graver books."

The novels also differ in that Isabel never actually commits adultery, whereas Emma Bovary is unfaithful with two lovers.⁵ Pykett believes that the reason Braddon veers from Flaubert's plot is because she was trying to escape her reputation as a bigamy novelist by avoiding the representation of sexual relations. Not only does Isabel resist Lansdell, she and George have no children. Instead, Braddon focuses on Isabel's romantic dreams.⁶ While Isabel resembles Emma Bovary in her obsession with novels, her marriage to a doctor, and her desire for excitement, Isabel never commits adultery and is independent by the close of the novel. *The Doctor's Wife* is about choices and luck, and as readers we follow its protagonist "through the difficult path of marrying one man, desiring another, and never achieving the life that fictional romances outlined for her" (Hassan 71).

⁵ According to Lyn Pykett, Isabel differs from Emma because "her love of fine things is presented as a form of aestheticism rather than a merely materialist or acquisitive love of luxurious objects" (xiii).

⁶ Isabel's excessive purity struck the *Saturday Review's* critic as unrealistic: "It may be questioned whether a personage so exclusively embodying a single idea could ever by possibility exist and continue acting in real life in anything like the fashion of Isabel in the fiction" (November 1864, 571).

Searching for Heroes – Novel Reading and a Dangerous Imagination

Of Isabel's many choices in the novel, her choice of books is the heart of her problems. Her use of books as an escape from her mundane existence is ultimately the source of her discontent. Isabel reads romances, although not of Sigismund Smith's variety. Instead, Braddon writes that Isabel “settled at once upon the highest blossoms in the flower garden of fiction, and wrote little extracts of her own choosing in penny account books, usually employed for the entry of butcher's meat and grocery” (28). The sentimental fictions Isabel reads are of the highest order, and yet, we are reminded that reading is a form of consumption through the reference to meat and grocery.

Part of Braddon's social critique in *The Doctor's Wife* hinges on the question: “what is Isabel escaping from?” The narrowness of Isabel's lower middle-class life drives her to read fiction, and Braddon's critique of Isabel's cultural environment is clear from the start of the novel. We first meet seventeen year old Isabel reading in the unkempt garden behind her family's dilapidated house in Camberwell, London. The overgrown garden symbolizes Isabel's fertile but unregulated imagination, and her family's lower middle class status: “It was a dear, old, untidy place, where the odour of distant pigsties mingles faintly with the perfume of roses; and it was in her neglected garden that Isabel Sleaford spent the best part of her idle, useless life” (Braddon 23). The garden itself is a social critique of Isabel's idleness and “untamed” taste.

The school where Isabel received her haphazard education is also indicted in her poor choices: “She had been taught a smattering of everything at a day-school in the Albany road....She knew a little Italian and enough French to serve for the reading of

novels that she might have better left unread” (Braddon 27). According to Kate Flint, “Domestic novels advance the theory that women (girls) have a character worth developing, but caution that ‘individualized subjecthood’ must be developed within specific paradigms. One of these paradigms was a carefully guided course of reading” (83). Nineteenth century conduct books promoted the idea that a girl’s mother should supervise her reading, as Sarah Stickney Ellis suggests in *The Mothers of England*: “A novel read in secret is a dangerous thing; but there are many works of taste and fancy, which, when accompanied by the remarks of a feeling and judicious mother, may be rendered improving to the mind, and beneficial to the character altogether” (339). With a second rate education and no maternal guidance, Isabel founders, and the narrator remarks, “If there had been any one to take this lonely girl in hand and organize her education, Heaven only knows what might have been made of her; but there was no friendly finger to point a pathway in the intellectual forest, and Isabel rambled as her inclination led her” (Braddon 29).

Because she laments her “vulgar and commonplace” life, Isabel’s misguided inclinations lead her live in her imagination: “She wanted her life to be like her books; she wanted to be a heroine” (Braddon 29). But Isabel is not a heroine, and when she marries George, mistakenly believing that marriage will be an escape from her mundane life, it is no surprise that she is not satisfied. Even his unromantic proposal is inadequate by her romantic standards, “were there not three volumes of courtship to be gone through first?” (Braddon 99). Isabel wants to postpone and savor the moment which romance novels suggest should be the most joyful of a young woman’s life. Flint adds to this point

that “Braddon foreshadows Nancy Miller’s understanding of a nineteenth century woman’s plot being one in which closure is resisted as long as possible in order to allow heroine, and reader, a sense of power and autonomy, when Isabel reflects glumly, that ‘her life had never been her own yet, and never was to be her own’” (105).

George is kind and respectable, but his “common sense” and practical nature are antithetical to Isabel’s ideas about romance. George loves Isabel, but he does not understand her. While they are courting, Isabel discovers that George “neither knew nor wished to know anything about Edith Dombey or Ernest Maltravers, and that he regarded the poems of Byron and Shelley as immoral and blasphemous compositions, whose very titles should be unknown to a well-conducted young woman” (Braddon 102). George’s taste runs to respectable reading, and we are told that “He had read Cooper’s novels, and a few of Lever’s; and he had read Sir Walter Scott and Shakespeare...but when Isabel began to talk about Edgar Ravenswood and Lucy, with her face all lighted up with emotion, the young surgeon could only stare wonderingly at his betrothed” (Braddon 102).

Once they are married, Pykett notes that “Isabel’s reading is shown to destabilize her by making her emotionally vulnerable and dissatisfied with ordinary domestic duties and her everyday life” (xiv). Isabel laments that George is not the hero of her imagination, making it clear that she never cared to see the “real” George before she married him, “Oh, if he had only been like Edgar Ravenswood!...Perhaps during all that engagement the girl never once saw her lover really as he was” (Braddon 104). But

Braddon never states that Isabel should submit to life with George, who is traditional in his way of life and does not notice her attempts to brighten their home.

Another component contributing to Isabel's boredom is the fact that George has inherited his father's longstanding housekeeper, Mrs. Jefferson, so Isabel has no real domestic duties. Because she feels superfluous in her own home, Isabel takes long walks and develops the habit of reading (and meeting Lansdell) at an idyllic spot called Thurston's Crag. Based on her domestic situation and romantic imagination, it is not surprising that Isabel is almost seduced. Lansdell is an amateur poet, and when Isabel reads his book of poetry, *An Alien's Dreams*, she thinks: "The Alien's dreams seemed like her own fancies, somehow: for they belonged to that bright other world which she was never to see" (Braddon 120). Flint argues that such statements are designed to develop the reader's understanding of Isabel, not sympathetic identification, as Lansdell's selfishness is exposed. He is described as "a beautiful useless, purposeless creature; a mark for maneuvering mothers; a hero for sentimental young ladies, - altogether a mockery, a delusion, and a snare" (Braddon 141). The narrator mocks Isabel when she describes her feelings through references to fiction, comparing herself to "a Pamela, amazed and bewildered by the first complimentary address of her aristocratic persecutor" (Braddon 138). Interestingly, it is Sigismund Smith who strips Lansdell down to a fictional stereotype. When Smith notices Isabel's infatuation, he advises her to combat her feelings through fiction: "if I were a young lady, and--and had a kind of romantic fancy for a person I ought not to care about, I'll tell you what I'd do with him--I'd put him into a novel, Izzie, and work him out in three volumes" (Braddon 230).

Isabel bases her judgments on her reading, a red flag to readers that Isabel is making bad choices and dangerous mistakes. Flint notes that this relationship “established a distance, characterized by sympathetic superiority, between reader and protagonist” (264). Readers are not encouraged to identify with Isabel – Braddon credits her reader as being wiser than her protagonist, with a more critical attitude towards fiction. It is interesting to consider Janice Radway’s theory that romance reading vicariously puts the reader into a passive relationship with a powerful man, leading her to abandon her sense of duty, as : “the heroine/reader is required to do nothing more than exist as the center of this paragon’s attention. Romantic escape is, therefore, a temporary but literal denial of the demands women recognize as an integral part of their roles as nurturing wives and mothers” (97). Isabel’s need for this type of escape signals a social problem more serious than a flighty girl’s misguided reading.

In *The Doctor’s Wife*, Braddon highlights social problems found in realist fiction. The narrator judges Isabel for inserting herself into the world of her imagination, but also recognizes the limitations of the world she is escaping. Viewing Isabel’s reading practices as social critique helps explain why Isabel is prone to misreading, and recalls a literary heroine like Maggie Tulliver. Tabitha Sparks compares the two girls and their social situations, noting that “the tension between Maggie’s self-interested desire for a more intellectual and spiritual existence, and the earthly realities that she must contend with, presents a dynamic similar to Isabel’s more prosaic conflict between reality and fantasy, and the cravings of her individual subjectivity in a bourgeois state that prepares an expects its women to be ‘angels-in-the-house’” (206). *The Doctor’s Wife* is not an

indictment of romance novels. Instead, it is a scathing commentary on the ideology of middle class domesticity that prompts and enables Isabel's romantic imagination, and allows her to spend her days reading novels. Braddon's critique is a warning that when young women live in a world devoid of social and intellectual stimulation and meaningful work, they risk devolving into a state of fantasy and delusion.

Trying to be Good – Reformative Reading

Regardless of the critical subtext, romance novels were perceived as threats to bourgeoisie domesticity from both a gender and class perspective. Flint notes that this makes sense “when one recalls the frequency with which the comparison between reading the right books, and keeping the right company, was made” (278). Isabel is in danger of impropriety on both counts, but ironically, it is Lansdell who attempts to guide her reading in a responsible direction. During one of their early meetings, Lansdell asks Isabel about her life and her reading, and “found that her life was a very idle one, and that she was perpetually reading the same books,—the dear dilapidated volumes of popular novels that were to be had at every circulating library.” (Braddon 185). In an effort to enlighten Isabel, Lansdell recommends books, two of which are *Life of Robespierre* and Carlyle's *French Revolution*. As Lansdell discovers:

The French Revolution was one of Isabel's pet oases in the history of the universe... and he was pleased to let in the light of positive knowledge on her vague ideas... Was it not an act of pure philanthropy to clear some of the sentimental mistiness out of that pretty little head? Was it not a good work rather than a harmful one to come now and then to this shadowy resting-place under the oak, and while away an hour or so with this poor little half-educated damsel, who

had so much need of some sounder instruction than she had been able to glean, unaided, out of novels and volumes of poetry? Braddon (185)

Lansdell's selection of Carlyle is particularly interesting, especially in its implication that Isabel continues to read his writing when she graduates to "graver books." Isabel's good works at novel's end suggest that she may have read Carlyle's *Past and Present* (1843), in which he laments the condition of Victorian England in the 1830's and 1840's; a time of rampant industrialization, poverty, and riots. Carlyle argues that a new "Aristocracy of Talent" must lead - and the English epic must be "written on the Earth's surface" (182). A reclamation of the land and labor are the solution, and the "idyll" is a product of labor that builds a "green flowery world" (Carlyle 335). Through labor, man will find salvation. This is the stance that Isabel takes once she inherits Mordred, as she allocates allotment gardens and works to improve conditions for the agricultural laborers. While Lansdell's motives are hardly altruistic, his attempts to expand her mind are Isabel's first steps toward reformative reading.

Isabel's reading, thus far, is condemned because it is obsessive and because she is not reading the right books. The issue is knowledge. Flint notes: "If fiction appeared to have a manifestly utilitarian end, offering the reader empirical information about historical events or geographical settings, then its defence was not hard, even if the exploration voyaged no farther the London's East End" (49). Isabel takes Lansdell's advice, and proceeds to spend time in his library at Mordred, where:

She took some of the noble folios from the lower shelves of the library, and read the lives of her favourite painters, and stiff translations of Italian disquisitions on art. Her mind expanded amongst all the beautiful things around her, and the

graver thoughts engendered out of grave books pushed away many of her most childish fancies, her simple sentimental yearnings. (Braddon 235)

Isabel realizes she has limited herself, and this “graver” reading offers new perspectives about life. As she becomes “less ignorant,” the narrator reports that “there were times when this romantic girl was almost sensible, and became resigned to the fact that Roland Lansdell could have no part in the story of her life” (Braddon 236).

It is not only Isabel who requires knowledge. Pykett argues that Braddon “assumes a practiced reader who can not only recognize the numerous literary allusions in *The Doctor’s Wife* but also decode them and interpret their significance” (xvi). Even in sensation fiction, authors like Mary Braddon and Rhoda Broughton expected their readers to possess a range of literary knowledge, and their novels are peppered with quotations from writers such as Shakespeare, Chaucer, Victor Hugo, and Milton. Such metatextual references undermine the belief that women read uncritically – challenging the assumption that a woman reader will automatically identify with the heroine in a novel. Literary allusions foreground the woman reader’s ability to read as a rational person, and by extension, validate her capacity to read life. The novel reader is acknowledged as having superior interpretive skills to the heroine, but Braddon offers Isabel the opportunity to correct her mistakes, read the right books, and in turn, acquire the knowledge and tools necessary to lead a moral, productive life.

A New Woman

Before Isabel can lead a meaningful, useful life, she must stop confusing fiction with reality. She must stop engaging in musings such as the following: “What romance had ever been written that was equal to this story; this perpetual fiction, with a real hero dominant in every chapter” (Braddon 104). Lansdell is not a romantic hero, and loving a real, flawed person is much different than the romances in novels. After Lansdell suggests that she leave George to become his mistress, Isabel realizes the gravity of her situation. When it becomes evident that George is dying, the error of her ways is almost too much to bear. She does not miscast George as a fictional hero, but sensibly realizes that he has the qualities of an actual hero. Isabel wonders: “Could he be dying? dying as heroic a death as any she had ever read of in her novels: the death of a man who speculates his life for the benefit of his fellow-creatures, and loses by the venture” (Braddon 365). Even in this tragic scene, Isabel considers her relationship to books, lamenting that the wake preparations should not be happening while George is still upstairs, whose “medical books were all primly arranged on one of the little vulgar cupboards by the fireplace. Ah, how often she had hated those medical books for being what they were, instead of editions of "Zanoni" and "Ernest Maltravers!"” (Braddon 371).

George’s devoted care of the villagers and rural laborers made him a local hero, and he is mourned by the entire village of Graybridge. George’s steady, quiet work is presented in contrast to Lansdell’s useless existence. Midway through the novel, Lansdell is groping for meaning in life, and avers to his neighbor, Raymond, “I shall go in for steam-farming, and agricultural implements, and drainage.... and we’ll improve the

condition of the farm-labourer; and we'll offer a prize for the best essay on, say, classical agriculture as revealed to us in the writings of Virgil" (Braddon 127). Lansdell's shallow, aristocratic life has rendered him unable to relate to other classes, and his reform schemes fail. He concedes: "I've tried my hand at the working-man, and he has rejected me as an intrusive nuisance. I've no doubt he was 'in his right'" (Braddon 153). Lansdell admittedly has led a useless life.

Lansdell is relieved of his misery when Isabel's father resurfaces and is revealed as a forger who spent time in jail due to evidence offered against him by Lansdell. The two men have a late night encounter and Lansdell is killed, just as George is dying of typhoid. Roland had bequeathed his estate to Isabel on the assumption that she would have eloped with him, but Braddon denies Isabel romantic satisfaction. The dying Lansdell implores Isabel, "If ever you should find yourself with the means of doing great good, of being very useful to your fellow-creatures, I should like you to remember my wasted life" (Braddon 391). George showed Isabel how to be useful, while Lansdell alerted her to the dangers of a life without meaningful work and provided her with the means to alter her circumstances.

At novel's end, Isabel is shown to be an excellent manager of her estate, the "chastening influence of sorrow" having "transformed a sentimental girl into a good and noble woman" (Braddon 402).⁷ Isabel repents of her previous selfishness by devoting

⁷ Sparks notes that the "utopian" ending weakens the realism of the novel. Braddon wrote to Edward Bulwer-Lytton that "My original intention was to have left George Gilbert alive, and Isabel reconciled to a commonplace life doing her duty bravely, and suppressing all outward evidence of her deep grief for Roland. Thus the love story would have been an episode in a woman's life, succeeded by an after-existence of quiet work and duty...I might have done much better with the story in this way, but I am so apt to be influenced by little scraps of newspaper criticism, and by what propel say to me." (Wolff 165).

herself to philanthropy, and the former flighty young girl is now even blessed by the laborers, “for model cottages have arisen in many a pleasant corner of the estate...Allotment gardens have spread themselves here and there on pleasant slopes; and coming suddenly upon some woody hollow, you find yourself face to face with the Tudor windows of a schoolhouse, a substantial modern building” (Braddon 402-403). Braddon’s conclusion suggests that a rational, socially promoted heroine can enjoy a meaningful life by positively impacting her community. Isabel is not a fallen woman, or an Edith Dombey whose extramarital desires destroy her, or a domestic angel. Instead, Isabel is a happy, independent woman who has finally found a purpose. It is clear from Isabel’s circumstances at the end of the novel that novels themselves are not condemned. Instead, Braddon suggests that readers must read novels responsibly. *The Doctor’s Wife* is a social critique about women’s limited education, middle class domesticity, and the dangers of an undisciplined imagination.

Louisa May Alcott and Women’s Work

Issues regarding women’s education, reading, work and activism were just as relevant in 1860’s America as they were in Braddon’s England. The need to develop rational, educated women with the skills, morals and desire to be productive members of their changing world existed on both sides of the Atlantic. In *Work: A Story of Experience*, Alcott addresses these issues through the professional challenges that her heroine, Christie Devon, faces in her quest for independence and personal fulfillment. In the latter third of the nineteenth century, as Bardes and Gosset write in *Declarations of*

Independence: Women and Political Power in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction, “no issue was more important to women than how they were to participate in an industrial and commercial society, a society where work increasingly meant leaving the domestic hearth, rural or urban, and going out among strangers” (87). The repercussions of women going out to work were huge, impacting domestic relations, public policy, and the national economy. *Work* begins as a female bildungsroman when Christie issues her own Declaration of Independence and leaves the farm to find work in the city.⁸ Her story begins with an appeal to those women who “are driven by necessity, temperament, or principle out into the world to find support, happiness, and homes for themselves” (“Work” 12). Christie’s new “Declaration of Independence” alludes to the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, during which a new Declaration of Independence was drafted that asserted all men and women were created equal. But Christie experiences the limited opportunities available to middle class women and finds that women and men are not equal. In her declaration, Christie contrasts the situation of men and women: “being of age, I’m going to take care of myself...If I’d been a boy, I should have been told to do it long ago,” and throughout her life she maintains that work is a source of freedom. The relationship between women’s work and domesticity was a complicated, shifting issue.

In *Work*, Alcott calls upon her own experiences as a working girl and as a Civil War nurse as the reader follows Christie Devon through a series of occupations including

⁸ *Work*’s structure as a bildungsroman progressing through moral lessons resembles John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1679), which Joy Kasson notes was one of Bronson Alcott’s favorite books. Christie Devon’s name recalls Bunyan’s allegorical Christiana and her quest for the divine. Like Christiana, Christine Doyle points out that “Christie is a pilgrim who first addresses her own religious crisis then works to evangelize others” (103).

servant, actress, governess, companion, seamstress, nurse, and ultimately as a spokeswoman for women's issues. Alcott began writing *Success* in 1861, a semi-autobiographical novel of her struggles in Boston in the 1850's. She revised the novel after the Civil War to reflect her new perspectives about women's employment, the home, and the community, resulting in, as Joy Kasson notes in her introduction to *Work*, "a novel of strong but conflicting feelings, shifting perspectives, and unresolved contradictions" (xii). *Work*, published in 1873, is Alcott's plea for women who wish to maintain their independence and integrity, and although it is a feminist novel, it acknowledges the importance of the home, love, and God, along with the value of activism.

Work is Alcott's most feminist novel, and is her attempt to reconcile work with domesticity. The novel breaks into two parts. The first part is a defense of working women, beginning with Christie's "declaration" and departure from her aunt and uncle's farm to find work in the city. The second part of the novel begins with the chapter titled "Beginning Again," and chronicles Christie's return to the domestic sphere after falling into a deep despair. Christie arrives at her new home in the spring. The cottage and its garden are a retreat from the commercial world that has damaged Christie, and in this place she will learn to work for love. The following chapters feature Christie's romance and marriage, her work as an army nurse, and the birth of her child. The final chapter opens with Christie's expression of satisfaction that she has fulfilled her ambitions: "I believe I *am* useful; I *know* I am happy" and concludes with Christie speaking on behalf of working women ("Work" 329).

While much critical attention has focused on Alcott's representation of domesticity - her literary bread and butter - her representation of working women has been underserved. Alcott worked, and *Work's* message reflects her philosophy as both the daughter of social reformers and as a person with experience in the commercial world. Bronson and Abigail Alcott subscribed to what Charles Strickland in his study *Victorian Domesticity: Families in the Life and Art of Louisa May Alcott*, describes as "the mix of philosophical idealism, romantic imagery, and native religious sentiment that was to become known as transcendentalism" (20).⁹ In response to her parents' teaching, Louisa believed in leading an active life, and that, along with her family's poverty and her decision to remain single acquainted her with the struggles of working women. In fact, Alcott's representation of the home as a retreat from the commercial world in her novels is ironic because it was Louisa's participation in the commercial world that funded the Alcott's household. Janis Dawson notes that based on Alcott's letters, "It is clear that she had a keen sense of what she was worth to her publishers... It is estimated that she earned far more for her publications than many of her male contemporaries, including Henry James and Herman Melville" (112). Alcott viewed work from the perspective of a member of a "High Victorian culture that proposed work as the spiritually privileged therapy for personal unhappiness," and her fictional heroines lose their sense of purpose

⁹ Alcott's reform interests in her fiction reflect her personal activism, as her "sympathies were with the goals of the movement of 'social purity.' She endorsed the campaign to ban white slavery, as the traffic in prostitution was then called, and she actually became active in efforts to organize a temperance movement in Concord" (Strickland 141).

when they are unable to work: Christie nearly throws herself in a river (Brodhead 75).

Work may have been ennobling, but at what price?

Work echoes statements from influential reformers and philosophers such as Theodore Parker and Henry David Thoreau who attacked society's hollow values, and the novel warns about the dangers of "everlasting work, with no object but money" ("Work" 10). Christie expresses her belief in the virtue of work when she states: "I'm willing to work, but I want work that I can put my heart into, and feel that it does me good, no matter how hard it is" ("Work" 11). Contemporary discourse expressed a growing anxiety about women's waged work that required women to enter the public sphere, and Alcott's working heroines must find ways to reconcile the domestic sphere with the public one. These heroines represent the plight of many working women. At the end of the eighteenth century, women were encouraged to contribute to the family income by working in factories, but by 1832, Sarah Joseph Hale, editor of the *Ladies' Magazine*, was warning women about the "contagion" of "money-making" (Cott 68).¹⁰ By the time Alcott published *Work*, the consensus was that women should dedicate themselves to the home, but as Bardes points out, many women worked out of necessity, and "the increasing number of white women employed in wage work after the Civil War

¹⁰ In the U.S., women from Yankee farms were the original industrial workforce in New England mills, but the panic of 1837 and an influx of immigrants eventually rendered this labor pool obsolete. As a result, more women were attending schools, and many took up teaching and writing. The issue of what was appropriate remained conflicted. Activists such as Catharine Beecher Stowe and her sister, Harriet, believed in separate spheres, arguing that women's duty was to teach domestic values as an alternative to capitalist principles. Fuller and Stanton, in contrast, argued that a woman should participate in any activities of which she was capable, such as running a business, voting, or Bible study. Separate spheres were unequal, and many texts of the period reflect these crosscurrents. For example, the end of *The Scarlet Letter* raises the question of women's role in the community. Many women's novels of the 1850s promoted female virtues of patience, submission, and chastity, rewarding young women not necessarily with marriage, but often with a domestic community centered around them.

made visible the contradiction between the prevailing philosophy of political economy and society's ideals of home and family" (104). Waged work for women was controversial, but belief in the moral value of work persisted. This belief enabled Alcott to justify her own work and remain "respectable," an imperative made clear through Christie's defense of her background. For example, when she enters domestic service she states: "My father was a gentleman; and I shall never forget it, though I do go out to service" ("Work" 24).¹¹

The nature of the family also changed, as the family became positioned as a moral counterweight to society. Alcott's fiction features scenes of families enacting what Richard Brodhead terms 'disciplinary intimacy'. This philosophy is present throughout *Work* as the first half of the novel shows families lacking such intimacy, while the second half features loving, domestic spaces which are, in Brodhead's term, disciplinary. While this seems to support the Victorian ideal of separate spheres, *Work* actually addresses the instability of that ideal. In *Work*, this instability is corrected by extending the domestic environment beyond the traditional family, as "a network of surrogate kin gradually defines itself around the heroine, making hers the story not only that of a self-made woman but that of a self-made or surrogate family" (Baym 38). *Work* begins with a stance for the independent woman, but later posits that independence requires support from a revised domestic sphere as Christie forges both biological and sororial families.

¹¹ This passage recalls a letter Bronson Alcott wrote defending Louisa's working outside the home: "There is no better blood nor more noble, to pride upon any family in Boston into which she may enter or serve, than flows in her own veins" (qtd. Strickland 53).

Through Christie's struggle to find a work/life balance, it is clear that *Work* rejects the division between domesticity and work. Elaine Showalter argues that the novel becomes coherent "once we substitute feminist definitions of 'work' for conventional definitions of waged labor. If work is reproduction as well as production, and domestic as well as commercial, then marriage is...a stage in Christie's working life" ("Alternative" xxxiv). Each of Christie's "careers" plays a role in her development and her philosophy about work. I am interested in the role of reading in this development. Christie is a thoughtful, intellectual woman, and is either underqualified or overqualified for certain careers that she pursues. A woman of lesser intellect would not be able to process the products of her experiences to overcome despair and develop into a productive citizen. Only when Christie finds the "right" books and learns to apply her knowledge productively is she able to find personal fulfillment. Her work is a trajectory toward this goal. In this chapter, I consider Christie's reading as a barometer of her spiritual condition, and investigate how reading enables her to reconcile her roles as both a domestic woman and a working woman.

Reading into the Profession

By examining the dangers of Christie's reading, the role of intellect and reason in her self-actualization becomes clear. We first see Christie reflecting about the "long, lonely" years at her uncle's farm, performing her chores with "a world of romance locked up in a heart hungry for love and a larger, nobler life" ("Work" 13). Because of her limited social and intellectual opportunities on the farm, Christie's only comfort was her

father's old books, "and these she wore out with much reading. Inheriting his refined tastes, she found nothing to attract her in the society of the commonplace and often coarse people about her" ("Work" 13). Christie wants to participate in the larger world, but finds herself in the predicament of being too well-read for menial work, but not accomplished enough for more suitable roles. Her original plan is to become a governess, "the usual refuge for respectable girls who have a living to get," but she lacks the necessary skills ("Work" 16). Christie realizes that her education is too "old-fashioned for the city," and gives up on becoming a governess. When she finds no work as a writer, she says to herself: "I'll put my pride in my pocket, and go out to service...it's better than idleness" ("Work" 17). Christie's retreat to this Puritan maxim is a signal that such work will not suit her.

Christie's first job is as a domestic servant to the rich, vain Mrs. Stuart. Mrs. Stuart and her husband are a shallow couple whose home is designed for socializing; it is not a warm, domestic space for cultivating character. Alcott remarks about such families by presenting Mrs. Stuart as what Nina Baym terms a "belle," whose "rage for money was the greatest threat to the dignity of woman's life and to the moral life of the entire nation" ("Woman's" 28). After spending several weeks as their servant, Christie laments: "The papers are full of appeals for help for the poor, reforms of all sorts, and splendid work that others are doing; but these people seem to think it isn't genteel enough" ("Work" 25). At this point, the reader can anticipate calls for social reform.

While in service at the Stuarts, Christie's reading habits change. She is a reader, but not always of the highest order. The attic next to her room was full of books, and "To

this store she found her way by a sort of instinct as sure as that which leads a fly to a honey-pot, and, finding many novels, she read her fill” (“Work” 26). One day, the Stuart’s cook, a former slave named Hepsey, interrupts Christie’s reading of Sir Walter Scott’s *The Abbot*.¹² Christie is concerned that something is wrong with “Aunty” who replies: “I was only wishin' I could read fast like you does” (26). Christie immediately resolves to tutor Hepsey, and when Christie adopts Hepsey’s cause as her own, “Novels lost their charms now, for Hepsey could give her a comedy and tragedy surpassing any thing she found in them” (“Work” 27). After hearing Hepsey’s life story of slavery, working to free her family, and her years of difficult domestic service, Christie reevaluates her own situation. While she never found housework at the farm demeaning, she feels degraded performing those duties for wages, distinguishing the difference between working for love and working for money. Alcott uses this experience to illustrate how “humiliating work in someone else’s home ...undermines any notion that wage work for women could, in itself, be liberating” (Fitzpatrick 33).

Ironically, it is a book that “liberates” Christie from domestic service. After remaining in service for over a year, one evening, the Stuarts return home to find Christie’s room ablaze. After falling asleep, “A book had slipped from her hand, and in falling had upset the candle on a chair beside her” (“Work” 28). After Mrs. Stuart goes into a comical frenzy to put out the flames, Christie laughs, causing Mrs. Stuart to cry: “Look at her! look at her!...She has been at the wine, or lost her wits...She is too fond of

¹² *The Abbot* (1820) is a historical novel written by Sir Walter Scott. It is a sequel to *The Monastery*, and one of the *Tales from Benedictine Sources*. This choice interesting because of Christie’s growing interest in religion, as well as her references to knights in shining armor.

books, and it has turned her brain” (“Work” 29). Have books turned Christie’s brain? Her unguided reading of her father’s texts has not helped her, novels have lost their charms in the face of harder truths, and an unnamed text has cost her a job and endangered her life. However, reading has also bonded her to Hepsey, and forced her to seek nobler pursuits.

Christie’s next position is as an actress where she enjoys moderate success, but more importantly, learns lessons that will carry her through upcoming trials. After leaving the Stuarts, Christie meets two women who are actresses at a respectable theatre, “good second-rate players, doing their work creditably and earning an honest living” (“Work” 30). Christie is delighted by the theater, and “though she had pored over her father’s Shakespeare till she knew many scenes by heart, she had never seen a play” (“Work” 30). She begins acting, and in her second season the company performs several of Dickens’ dramatized novels and Christie’s performance is praised. The narrator reports that Christie “loved those books, and seemed by instinct to understand and personate the humor and pathos of many of those grotesque creations” (“Work” 39). Christie’s ability to inhabit “grotesque creations” may be a skill, but not a compliment. In relating closely to fictional characters she is losing touch with her ability to relate to real people, and the moral foundation she established through her work with Hepsey is at risk. As Christie’s fame grows, so does her concern with public opinion, until “She had no thought now beyond her art...no care for anyone but herself” (“Work” 41).¹³

¹³ Alcott acted, but stopped because of its questionable reputation. Christie is surprised when years later her performance for the Wilkins children is encouraged by Mr. Power because it occurs within a domestic rather than a public sphere. Christie’s statement: “I’d rather *be* a woman than *act* a queen” expresses her realization that the power women enjoy acting is inferior to using their traditional strengths (“Work” 206).

In her final turn as a professional actress, when Christie is asked to select a play for a benefit she chooses the comedy, *Masks and Faces*.¹⁴ Christie will play the lead character whose romantic entanglements in the play inspire jealousy from a fellow actress. Christie's response to her friend's taunts is conceited, and she is ashamed of the type of person she has become. During the play, Christie suffers an accident, and that, in tandem with her realization that acting is threatening her integrity, drives her from the profession. She realizes during her convalescence "the worth of many things which she had valued very lightly until then, including her health, life, and the value of dependence on others" ("Work" 47).

When she recovers, the new talents she has developed, such as a better knowledge of music and French, help her secure a governess position. In this role, class relations become a factor, as her employer, Mrs. Saltonstall, recalls Mrs. Stuart: "her time was spent in dressing, driving, dining and dancing; in skimming novels, and embroidering muslin" ("Work" 53).¹⁵ While in her service, Christie receives an unrespectable offer to travel abroad from Mrs. Saltonstall's brother, Philip Fletcher, who, like *Jane Eyre's* Rochester, is a wealthy man who has wasted his life. Fletcher is attracted to Christie, and likes to watch her read to the children. On one occasion as Philip is watching, the narrator reports: "Never had she read so badly, for she could not keep her mind on her book...She

¹⁴ *Masks and Faces* is an 1852 comedy by Tom Taylor and Charles Reade. The play is set in the 1750's and is based on the great Peg Woffington, Covent Garden star and Garrick's former mistress, who restores an admirer to his wife and rescues a poor poet-painter from destitution.

¹⁵ Bronte criticized the position of governess as "a perverse class phenomenon, where an intelligent young gentlewoman is placed in a privileged environment without privileges, a wealthy family circle in which she is neither servant nor relation" (Seelye 12).

was reading 'John Halifax,' and instead of saying 'Phineas Fletcher' she said Philip, and then colored to her forehead" ("Work" 62). Christie's choice of *John Halifax, Gentleman*, an 1856 novel by Dinah Craik, is interesting, as its plot foreshadows Christie's future. The novel is about an orphan, John Halifax, who is determined to make his way in the world through hard work. John is taken in by Abel Fletcher, a Quaker, and meets his son Phineas who becomes his friend. John eventually finds success in both work and love. Philip laughs at Christie's slip, but such exchanges prompt other visitors at the seaside resort to speculate about the relationship. When one woman remarks that Philip may be after the governess her friend replies, "Gracious, no! she's a dowdy thing, always trailing round with a book" ("Work" 63). Christie is associated with books, and during a discussion with Philip regarding *Jane Eyre*, she argues that marriage will not reform Rochester. Guided by this realization, Christie refuses to travel to Europe with Philip. In response to his condescending offer, Christie, in a speech reminiscent of Jane's equality speech, asserts, "The sacrifice would not have been all yours, for it is what we are, not what we have, that makes on human being superior to another..What can you give me but money and position in return for the freedom I should sacrifice in marrying you?" ("Work" 70).

Guided by *Jane*, Christie extricates herself from the Saltonstalls and finds work as a companion to an invalid, Helen Carrol. When Christie arrives at the Carrol's, Helen is resting and Christie is asked to wait in a parlor where she "fell to reading the first book she took up" ("Work 78). When Helen wakes, she asks what Christie is reading. Christie answers that she is reading *Don Quixote*, to which Helen remarks, "They gave me that to

make me laugh, but I did not find it funny; neither was it sad enough to make me cry as you do” (“Work” 78). This 1615 novel by Cervantes is an interesting choice, as it involves quests, belief in romance, a return home, and the restoration of both sanity and faith. But Christie is not really reading— she is crying in her pity for Helen who recognizes the truth and is also aware that her sanity will never return. Christie discovers that the Carrols have reenacted the *Jane Eyre* plot of Bertha Mason, and Helen is the product of a union that produced children in spite of the hereditary threat of insanity. Christie grows to love Helen and her siblings and researches their disease, telling Helen’s sister Bella: “Since I came here, I have read many books, thought much, and talked often with Dr. Shirley about this sad affliction. He thinks you and Harry may escape it” (“Work” 99). The state of the Carrols raises questions about the moral duties of families, and through Christie’s influence, Bella and Harry have the opportunity to redeem past transgressions. Helen’s suicide necessitates a new career for Christie, and after a long search she finds work as a seamstress, at which point the novel becomes darker.

Affected by her experience with Helen, Christie becomes even more world-weary by her new employers, Miss Cotton and Mrs. King, references to the capitalistic textile industry as well to the slogan “King Cotton,” which was used by southerners to support secession. Christie finds herself doing taxing work on a shift with lower class girls, “well-meaning girls, but full of the frivolous purposes and pleasures which their tastes prompted and their dull life fostered” (“Work” 103). Christie turns inward during her long shifts, and “her evenings at home were devoted to books, for she had the true New England woman's desire for education, and read or studied for the love of it” (“Work”

103). Alcott is careful to remind us that Christie is morally and intellectually superior to her garment industry coworkers. However, there is one young woman who Christie is drawn to – a fellow seamstress named Rachel.

These female supervisors of the workroom profess to be concerned with both the production and the morality of their establishment, so consequently, when Rachel is exposed as a fallen woman, she is fired because she threatens the workshop's reputation.¹⁶ The supervisors briefly consider keeping Rachel on, but conclude that "Charity at that price is too expensive a luxury to be indulged" ("Work" 140). In the commercial world everything has a price, even charity. Christie resigns in protest of Rachel's dismissal and attempts to live a charitable life although she is destitute and alone. To overcome her depression Christie looks to religion, but her search is futile.¹⁷ Christie fails in her search for God as she investigates traditional religions, none of which fulfill her needs, and suffers until "life seemed an utter failure, God a delusion, and the long, lonely years before her too hard to be endured" ("Work" 150). She wonders how she will ever know God, and searches for answers in books: "She read many books, some

¹⁶ Maria Sanchez writes: "When William Sanger published his *History of Prostitution* in 1858, prostitutes or 'fallen woman' had become one of the most controversial objects of antebellum social reformers." Sanchez explains that the causes of an increase in prostitution in this period, including industrialization, the growing immigrant population, and movement to the city, all affected family structures and woman's means of support. There was clearly a correlation between the rise in prostitution and limited work opportunities for women. Sanchez adds that a fallen woman "could indeed be a prostitute, but she could also be the victim of rape, a partner in an extramarital or premarital affair, a woman behaving in an 'overly familiar' manner, or a widow daring to engage in social relations" (97).

¹⁷ Baym points out that regardless of the heroine's religious convictions, domestic fiction writers acknowledge that God supports ideals of love and not money, and they "find piety an effective strategy in a woman's struggle to define herself over against social encroachment, and present it is a pragmatic tool for their heroine's use" (41-42). Christie must wait for the right brand of religion to guide her through her spiritual crisis. Once she finds Mr. Power, she finds her role and takes *Work* beyond traditional, pre-Civil War domestic novels by using her voice for secular reform outside the boundaries of the traditional family.

wise, some vague, some full of superstition, all unsatisfactory to one who wanted a living God” (“Work” 115). Her search ends in despair, and the narrator comments: “It is not always want, insanity, or sin that drives women to desperate deaths; often it is a dreadful loneliness of heart, a hunger for home and friends, worse than starvation” (“Work” 150). As Christie considers drowning herself, Rachel appears at the river, rescues Christie, and places Christie among a group of philanthropists led by the reverend Thomas Power.

Reading for Love

After Christie’s rescue, the second half of the novel changes course as Alcott focuses on Christie’s moral healing. In his article, “The Limits of Sympathy: Louisa May Alcott and the Sentimental Novel” Glen Hendler notes that throughout the first half of the novel, Christie’s “attempts to deal with the dissatisfaction with her family life are individualistic, and each fails precisely for that reason” (693). Christie’s lessons from paid work seem to be a feminist tract on the need for meaningful work for women, but after Christie faces the “merciless economy of the moral marketplace,” she turns from public life to embrace “the sentimental economy of family love and women’s friendships” (Fitzpatrick 34). When Rachel brings Christie to Cynthia Wilkins’ home, Christie begins her recovery in the warmth of a busy kitchen. In return, Christie assists Cynthia by watching her pack of mischievous children. In one scene, the children are playing when chaos ensues, as the children, who have been using pages from a book to make paper dolls, start a fire: “Wash proposed to make a bonfire, and did so with an old book; but Gusty, with a firm belief in future punishment, tried to save it, and fell a victim

to her principles, as the virtuous are very apt to do” (“Work” 141). This is an apt statement that applies to the novel’s central characters. The suffering book is a book of ballads, including ‘John Gilpin’ and ‘Chevy Chase,’ which have been cut into dolls.¹⁸ Books in this home are valued as objects but not for their content. This is a warm, domestic space, but not one that will fulfill Christie’s intellectual needs.

At this point, the nature of Christie’s journey changes. What began as a search for individual accomplishment has become a search for guidance through faith. Through Cynthy, Christie meets the liberal minister, Mr. Power, based on Theodore Parker, a friend of Bronson Alcott and a powerful reformer. Christie learns that Mr. Power believes in mercy and activism, and in his church she finds the sense of God that she missed in her earlier spiritual crisis. She is moved by the presence of so many women in his congregation and by his style of prayer, that of a “quiet talk with God” (“Work” 160). Elizabeth Keyser points out that by lessening the distance between himself, his congregation, and God, Mr. Power “undermines the hierarchical divisions and dualities upon which patriarchal institutions depend” (110). Mr. Power’s principles clearly mirror those of Theodore Parker, whose congregation of 7,000 in the 28th Congregational Society of Boston included Louisa May Alcott, William Lloyd Garrison, Julia Ward Howe, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Parker's biographer, John White Chadwick, wrote that Parker was involved with almost all of the reform movements of the time, including “peace, temperance, education, the condition of women, penal legislation, prison

¹⁸ This 1782 comic ballad by William Cowper titled *The Diverting History of John Gilpin* was based on a real life character whose exploits became legendary. The poem tells how Gilpin and his family became separated after Gilpin loses control of his horse.

discipline, the moral and mental destitution of the rich, the physical destitution of the poor” (235). Parker was an ardent abolitionist, as well as an advocate for women’s issues. It is easy to imagine Christie Devon attending Parker’s 1853 sermon titled “The public function of woman” in which he argued: “The domestic function of the woman does not exhaust her powers... To make one half of the human race consume its energies in the functions of housekeeper, wife and mother is a monstrous waste of the most precious material God ever made.” Through Parker’s fictional counterpart, Mr. Power, Christie finds employment with the Sterlings, and when she reaches their cottage, Mrs. Sterling leads her “into a room whose principal furniture seemed to be books, flowers, and sunshine,” and Christie muses, “I have fallen among a set of angels” (“Work”171). She is further intrigued when, while cleaning David’s room, she pauses:

For books always attracted her, and here she saw a goodly array whose names were like the faces of old friends, because she remembered them in her father's library. Faust was full of ferns, Shakespeare, of rough sketches of the men and women whom he has made immortal. Sainly Herbert lay side by side with Saint Augustine's confessions. Milton and Montaigne stood socially together, and Andersen's lovely “Märchen” fluttered its pictured leaves in the middle of an open Plato; while several books in unknown tongues were half-hidden by volumes of Browning, Keats, and Coleridge... “Melancholy, learned, and sentimental,” said Christie to herself, as she settled David's character. (“Work” 174)

Mr. Power links Christie and David, hoping that he might “be the gardener to mix the two human plants before him,” like the complex double flowers he admires (“Work” 197).

Christie’s return to the kitchen in both the Wilkins and the Sterling homes is a return to “past sources of strength, the solidarity she shared in Aunt Betsey’s and Hepsey’s kitchens but found threatened, compromised, or destroyed by the patriarchal

home, the male workplace, and the female workplace organized on a male model” (Keyser 111). This return is necessary because before Christie can join Mr. Power’s mission; she must, as the chapter title “Beginning Again” indicates, experience a rebirth at the Wilkins’ and a moral education at the Sterlings’, where Alcott explores the conflation of work and domesticity.

David Sterling is the true conduit for Christie’s appreciation of the domestic sphere. He has integrity and is praised for good works, but Christie hopes for someone more charismatic and ambitious. She laments to Mr. Power that David “won’t seem to care for anything but watching over his mother, reading his old books, and making flowers bloom double,” but Mr. Power corrects Christie’s opinion of manliness and accuses her of hero worship. Christie comes to realize that “she had made a hero for herself; a sort of melancholy Jaques; She rather liked this picture; for romance dies hard in a woman” (“Work” 175). But as she grows to know David, Christie begins to see that “the simple truth was better than the sentimental fiction” (“Work 179).

Christie and David fall into a comfortable routine, working together in the nursery garden. In one instance, as Christie shapes bouquets, she hums, “Welcome, maids of honor,/ You do bring / In the spring,/ And wait upon her” (“Work” 180). David interjects that the last verse of that poem is the best, and is “pleased and surprised to find the new-comer singing Herrick’s lines ‘To Violets’” (Work” 180). Christie does not want David to think that she is sentimental and changes the conversation, explaining that she is trying to make each bouquet expressive. David praises her work, saying “I can grow the flowers, but not read them” (“Work” 180). This is a nice example of two parts working together to

form a whole, an example of how literature connects Christie and David, and an example of literature enabling her to read the world around her.

Christie is losing her romantic notions. She concedes in a conversation with Mr. Power: “knights go crusading as gallantly as ever against the giants and the dragons, though you don't discover it, because, instead of banner, lance, and shield they carry— ‘Bushel-baskets, spades, and sweet-flag for their mothers’” (“Work” 196). When Mr. Power presents Christie with a gift; Thomas Carlyle’s 1841 study *Heroes and Hero-worship*, he asks if she has found her hero, to which she replies, “No, sir, but I’m looking hard” (“Work” 209). While Carlyle’s book focuses on great men, primarily political and military leaders who enacted sweeping change, Christie’s search for a “hero” leads her closer to home. The gift also recalls Carlyle’s philosophies on topics such as labor and the value of agricultural production, reminiscent of Isabel’s revelations in *The Doctor’s Wife*.

David and Christie grow closer, and when the Wilkins visit, Mr. Power asks Christie to play Portia from *The Merchant of Venice*. She complies, and “with a graceful gesture of the hands, she delivered with heartfelt emphasis the first part of Portia's pretty speech to Bassiano”:

Happy in this, she is not yet so old
But she may learn; happier than this,
She is not bred so dull but she can learn;
Happiest of all, is that her willing spirit
Commits itself to yours to be directed,
As from her lord, her governor, her king (“Work” 212)

Christie shines as an actress, but Keyser points out that her decision to play the “self-abnegating, feminine rather than the self-assertive, androgynous Portia...anticipates a resumption of the martyr role that plunged her into despair” (115).

Christie will indeed fall into another dark period. But before this happens, she tells Mr. Power, “I always thought in reading the lives of saints or good men of any time that their struggles were the most interesting and helpful things recorded. Human imperfection only seems to make real piety more possible, and to me more beautiful” (“Work” 215). David, in his own imperfection, has made it his mission to help desperate women to atone for his past transgressions. Christie’s respect for him grows daily, and as she cleans his room: “She set the books in order daily, taking many a sip of refreshment from them by the way, and respectfully regarded those in unknown tongues, full of admiration for David's learning” (“Work” 221). But when a former lost soul named Kitty reappears, Christie misreads David’s feelings and her displeasure is evident in her actions: “In the evening she read and studied with a diligence that amazed and rather disgusted David; since she kept all her lively chat for his mother, and pored over her books when he wanted her for other things” (“Work” 224). Literature, which formerly fostered mutual respect, is now used as a shield.

Christie leaves the Sterlings and Mr. Power offers her new employment. As Mr. Power’s assistant, ministering to real world needs, Christie remains a wounded woman who, if she “had been a regular novel heroine at this crisis, would have grown gay in single night, had a dangerous illness, gone mad, [but] being only a commonplace woman she did nothing so romantic” (“Work” 239). Ironically, Christie is a heroine in a novel,

but *Work* is not a romance. Mr. Power resolves to rejuvenate Christie by giving her “Books and work,” and while in his service, Christie “saw the best and bravest men and women of our times... each bent on a mission that should benefit mankind” (“Work” 240). Christie is inspired by Mr. Power’s inclusive mission, anticipating her future as an activist and reformer.

Christie begins to look forward to David’s visits to Mr. Power. She realizes: “Gods are gone, heroes are hard to find, and one should be contented with good men” (“Work” 246). When Christie and David confess their feelings, she joyfully explains to Mr. Power: “his 'old books' have given him something better than learning, and he has convinced me that 'double flowers' are loveliest and best” (“Work” 274). David is rewarded by a reunion with his sister, Rachel, whom he had turned his back on years ago due to her relationship with a man who later abandoned her, and by marriage to Christie who will share his spiritual, reform, and business duties, indicating that if “men and women have much in common, then a consciousness of the fact might point a way toward... finding a new kind of marital relationship, one based not only on mutual affection, but also on a sharing of privilege and duty” (Strickland 102).

The Civil War presents ample opportunities to serve. David enlists, and Christie serves as an army nurse, joyfully exclaiming, “It’s a grand time to live, a splendid chance to do and suffer” (Alcott 376).¹⁹ The war changes her life in dramatic ways and Christie will suffer, especially when war claims David’s life. Typical of domestic fiction, love guides Christie, and Brodhead argues that Alcott portrays these revelations best in “the

¹⁹ Christie’s nursing is based on Alcott’s experience as a nurse in Washington DC’s Union Hotel Hospital.

deathbed scene, hallmark of the sentimental mode,” where “grief and loss discipline and domesticate” (90-91). After David is shot saving an escaping slave Christie cries at his deathbed: “Why did you pay such a price for that girl’s liberty?” (“Work” 315). David responds that he owed it, and tells Christie: “Don’t mourn, dear heart, but work; and by and by you will be comforted” (“Work” 315). Hendler argues that sentimental death scenes inspire the survivors “to redouble their efforts in whatever spiritual or social cause the novel is championing, inspired by the example of the virtually angelic deceased” (691). Christie’s war service is another transition point, anticipating that her activism will not be limited to religious ministries.

Christie’s grief is total, and David will forever be her hero: “In all the knightly tales she loved so well, what Sir Galahad had rescued a more wretched, wronged, and helpless woman than the poor soul whose dead baby David buried tenderly before he bought the mother’s freedom with his life?” (“Work” 315). His room becomes her refuge and one day, as she is trying to understand God’s reasons for taking David, she receives an answer to her prayers “for some sign that death had not estranged them” when the wind causes David’s flute to sound a note (“Work” 320). After this incident, Christie, “spent the long spring days lying on the old couch in his room, reading his books, thinking of his love and life” (“Work” 320).

Reading to Reform

As Christie comes to term with David’s death, she has another concern. She has given birth to a daughter, affectionately nicknamed “Pansy.” Christie’s concern is for

Pansy's education, because, "she could not bear to feel that her child should be denied...the opportunities that educate, the society that ripens character and gives a rank which money cannot buy" ("Work" 323). The answer to her worries comes from a surprising source – the uncle she left behind on the farm. Upon her aunt's death, he summons her and inquires, "How are you goin' to eddicate the little gal?," to which Christie responds, "If the garden fails I can teach, nurse, sew, write, cook even, for I've half a dozen useful accomplishments at my fingers' ends, thanks to the education you and dear Aunt Betsey gave me" ("Work" 325). Her uncle reveals that he has "a tidy little sum," and asks Christie what she would do with the money. She responds that in addition to educating Pansy, she would help former slaves. Her uncle does not like that, so Christie offers: "Wounded soldiers, destitute children, ill-paid women, young people struggling for independence, homes, hospitals, schools, churches, and God's charity all over the world" (327).

Why does David die while Christie survives? According to Fitzpatrick, Alcott martyrs David to "create a new community dedicated to service in a revised domestic sphere that is entirely female" (32). Christie and Pansy return home and unite the women of Christie's journey into a family based on sisterhood, benevolence, activism, and domesticity. At forty, Christie finds that her work is in the community, but grounded in the private sphere. Her background qualifies Christie to serve as both a mediator for middle and upper-class reformers and an advocate for working-class women. Strickland argues that Alcott emphasized in her fiction the value of moral uplift, which "rested on the assumption that social uplift could best be achieved by spreading the influence of a

moral and cultural elite” (44). While some of these elite are men like Mr. Power and David Sterling, most are women.

Christie is one such woman, and when she attends a women’s movement meeting, she finds that the speakers, “did their part with kindness, patience, and often unconscious condescension, showing in their turn how little they knew of the real trials of the women whom they longed to serve” (“Work” 330). The first speaker is an “accomplished creature with learning radiating from every pore,” who loses her less sophisticated audience when she talks about an “Ideal Republic” (“Work” 330). A second speaker delivers a fiery speech demanding suffrage, but, “one-half of them were [not] quite clear what it meant, and the other half were as unfit for it as any ignorant Patrick” (“Work” 330). A third speaker loses the crowd with statistics. When Christie is asked to approach the platform, she elects to speak from the audience, having learned from Mr. Power to lessen the gap between the leader and the flock. As a result, her audience “felt that a genuine woman stood down there among them like sister, ready with head, heart, and hand to help then help themselves” (“Work” 333). Speakers and audience beg her to return and bridge the gap between them, “for, from the gentleman her father she had inherited the fine instincts, gracious manners, and unblemished name of an old and honorable race; from the farmer's daughter, her mother, came the equally valuable dower of practical virtues, a sturdy love of independence, and great respect for the skill and courage that can win it” (“Work” 334).

Christie’s skills are unique, but if social and moral uplift must come from the elite, as Alcott suggests, Christie knows that her voice is not enough, so she enlists the

help of Bella Carrol. Christie charges Bella to “set a new fashion: ...I don't ask you to be a De Staël, and have a brilliant salon: I only want you to provide employment and pleasure for others like yourself, who now are dying of frivolity or ennui” (“Work” 338). When Bella doubts she can do this, Christie explains: “I have done all sorts of dreadful things to get my living, and I have neither youth, beauty, talent, or position to back me up; so I should only be politely ignored if I tried the experiment myself” (“Work” 339). Strickland complains that the solution *Work* proposes is vague, because all Christie can offer Bella is the suggestion to reform the upper classes by using her home to discuss serious issues. However, as Bardes and Gossett point out, “the conversation between Christie and Bella emphasizes two of Alcott’s strongest beliefs – that all women are sisters despite their class differences, and that, while their work may be different, women of all classes can and should find work” (103). Bella is concerned that the few women she knows who “know something of music, art, or literature” are not popular with gentlemen,” but Christie shares the truth she has discovered on her journey: “Women lead in society, and when men find that they can not only dress with taste, but talk with sense, the lords of creation will be glad to drop mere twaddle and converse as with their equals” (“Work” 339). This rapport will require women who are educated, well-read, rational observers of society.

At the end of the novel, Christie is satisfied because “the change in herself has changed the world’s attitude toward her, so much that was formerly denied her now comes to her unsought” (Baym 19). While Christie’s journey ends well, Bardes and Gossett argue that in the end, “Alcott hedges on the extent of the change she envisions.

The nursery garden, like the world of women, exists in apparent isolation from the rest of the economy” (103). But, Christie’s position as an independent businesswoman shows her resolving the conflict between capitalism and domesticity, a conflict that generated major social issues such as women’s independence, education, greater social and political freedoms, the right to a fair wage, and the right to design their own support network. To work toward these reforms, Christie will use her talents to speak in a universal language without “learning, statistics, or politics,” but with “purpose of heart” (“Work” 332). Christie’s development into a successful speaker and mediator is the culmination of her quest for personal fulfillment.

Work is the product of Alcott’s experience, including her frustration with limited opportunities, depression, and friendships with influential reformers. *Work* begins as a challenge to the limitations of the domestic, sentimental ideal and ends in an embrace among Christie’s ‘loving league of sisters,’ bound by the hope that “the coming generation of women will not only receive but deserve their liberty” (“Work” 344). The reform elements in *Work* and its valorization of independent women place the novel among those advocating more opportunities for women as workers and public figures. Through Christie, Alcott expresses the hope that women will unite as a community that transcends race, class, and the traditional family, as *Work* advocates a “public femininity that anticipates the possibility of a collective feminism” (Hendler 701). Alcott’s message and Christie’s revelation is that women from all walks of life can bond in the spirit of God’s goodness and social reform, extending their love beyond the domestic sphere.

Embracing Change

I am interested in *The Doctor's Wife* and *Work* because of their different approaches to two major issues of their time – the value of women's work and social reform. Both Alcott and Braddon worked to support their families, dabbled in acting, and wrote sensation fiction that led to more “literary” offerings, but how they incorporate social statements into their novels is vastly different. Braddon focuses on issues of women's education, middle class domesticity, and rural reform through Isabel's obvious and dangerous reading habits. While Isabel's reading grounds Braddon's novel, Alcott mentions Christie's reading less frequently, yet it is integral to her character. Through Christie as a reader, worker, and activist, Alcott tackles issues about women's work, the dangers of capitalism, and the opportunity that lies in a revised version of the domestic sphere.

Reading plays a formative role in nineteenth century women's novels. In *The Doctor's Wife*, Isabel's addiction to romances is problematic, but her reading becomes a catalyst for education and self-improvement as it propels Isabel beyond her questionable upbringing and transforms her romantic imagination to one that is productive. Unlike Madame Bovary, Isabel learns to value “graver” texts, and moves beyond romances to biography, history, and philosophy, engaging with contemporary debates about morality, culture, and novels. Isabel's early reading glamorizes aristocratic values, however, as Lyn Pykett argues, the novel “ends with an accommodation between aristocratic and bourgeois values, as Isabel is transformed by coming to understand the importance and worth of her husband's altruistic devotion to his work and patients, by suffering, by

reading serious books, and...by the refinement of mind that has been produced by the reading which has hitherto led her astray” (xvi). Isabel is a new woman at the end of the novel, and her “foolish youth is separated from her wiser womanhood by a barrier that is formed by two graves” (402). Two men have to die in order for Isabel to live a useful life, but at novel’s end she has crossed class boundaries, become a widow and an heiress, and we leave her as a wiser, worldly, benevolent woman.

While England was struggling to strike a balance between aristocratic and middle class values, changes in America positioned women to become more educated and in turn, more publicly active. Movement from rural areas to the cities contributed to women’s education and social skills, providing middle-class women with the qualities necessary to exercise a public voice, while religious developments encouraged women to participate in social reform. *Work* considers these changes, and there is a visionary element in Christie’s journey. While *Work* shares many elements with domestic novels of the day, its feminist vision of an independent woman living within her female community is progressive. While Christie’s success is the product of her spiritual and moral growth, such growth is only possible because of Christie’s education, in particular, her reading. Christie enters capitalist society with a foundation of reading from her father, a gentleman, as well as the practical education she gains on the farm. Both of these sources enable her to secure positions as a domestic servant, actress, governess, and companion, and ultimately as a political activist. Reading also creates a bond of respect between Christie and David. Her education enables her to appreciate his intellect, and to learn to interpret texts and people in deeper ways. *Work* differs from other domestic novels in part

because it was started before the Civil War and completed afterwards, and Nina Baym argues that “the liberal women who began their writing careers after the Civil War found the redemptive possibilities of enlightened domesticity to be no longer credible” (50). While Christie’s journey resembles that of other heroines, her skills, religious beliefs, and intellect lead her to conclude that she must physically leave the domestic sphere to affect meaningful, social change.

Maria Sanchez observes that “social reform writing typically express a truth that counters dominant beliefs about and representations of the disempowered, seeking to reveal the shared humanity between them and their (theoretically) empowered readers” (22). Novels have the ability to do this as well, and when authors create heroines whose stories are either a call for reform, or set an example about activism, readers respond. I believe that the association between reader and heroine is made even stronger when those heroines are readers themselves. *The Doctor’s Wife* and *Work* both feature reading heroines who learn to revise their own reading practices to become more educated, productive citizens. These critically underserved novels are themselves a form of social reform writing, advocating for issues relevant in their day and calling upon their readers to embrace such changes.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

I have written this dissertation with the understanding that novels are political products of a culture and that the relationship is symbiotic between the novel form and political culture. In doing so, I have argued as well that culture and politics are influenced by literature. Novels imparted the nineteenth-century woman reader with an awareness of what Kate Flint terms “the sensations of difference and of similarity,” and the choices the nineteenth-century woman reader made about “where to differ, where to acknowledge a bond” were political (30). The novel encouraged readers to reconsider their domestic and social positions, as nineteenth-century women writers “invited their readers to join in a process which involved the active construction of meaning, rather than its revelation” (Flint 278).

Politics, history, and literature are indeed intertwined, but when national and political ideologies differ, the elements that “construct” the woman reader shift. This is where the value of a transatlantic consideration lies. In a century marked by wars, social mobility, improved circulation of books, increased female literacy and an expanding reading public, nineteenth-century texts question the relevance of outdated models in conduct and writing. In the eighteenth-century, imitation was the practice by which models of literature, culture, and conduct traveled among classes, genders, and societies, producing what David Hume called “a similitude” among nations. What about national

character? In juxtaposing representations of British and American women readers, it becomes evident that nineteenth-century authors addressed this question in their representation of gender ideals and differed on whether their heroines embraced such roles.

Nineteenth-century novels are valuable sources for understanding the cultural changes that brought women into the public sphere because novels helped socialize individuals. Many women novelists offered political commentaries and social critiques, and Nina Baym suggests that by 1850, the novel was “conscripted by the reviewing establishment as an agent of social control,” in which “the class struggle is less significant than the generational struggle, and, above all, the gender struggle” (“Novels” 170). However, the impact of fiction on politics is limited. According to Barbara Bardes, “although novels participate in the debate over what kinds of resources American women should control, they are unable to establish a viewpoint entirely independent of the prevailing ideology” (16). That dominant ideology in Britain and the United States continued to insist that a woman’s place was in the home, and even novelists such as Sedgwick, Alcott, and Brontë who created independent women resisted giving their fictional heroines authority over men in the public sphere.

But perhaps “authority” wasn’t the point. George Eliot begins *Middlemarch* with a reference to St. Theresa, which she believes is essential to her reader’s cultural knowledge. Eliot writes: “Who that cares much to know the history of man, and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time, has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the life of Saint Theresa” (3). Eliot calls attention to this saint to show

how important contributions by a woman are forgotten, and according to Nancy Armstrong, she “asks us to acknowledge the fact that human experience is profoundly affected by those whose work takes place in a domain outside the political sphere. What is true for women’s history, she implies, holds true for the novelist’s craft as well: ‘the growing good of the world is partly dependent on ‘unhistoric acts’” (43; Eliot 900). Writing novels may not constitute an historic act, but the novel’s impact on its readers had historic implications and has contributed to that reader’s decisions about whether to accept or question assumptions about her social and cultural role. By associating with reading heroines, the woman reader, as Flint argues, recognizes “herself AS woman when she reads, and hence acknowledging, even if seeking to transform, the social circumstances which the woman reader must inevitably negotiate, was a crucial form of self-affirmation” (327). The choices a woman reader made while reading were political, and novels provided the means for her either to passively succumb to the fantasy of fiction, or to assert her sense of self with the comfort that she was not alone.

Reading played a formative role in nineteenth century women’s novels, for their fictional heroines as well as their readers. To help women readers make choices while reading, and in life in general, women authors wrote to warn, educate, and expand their reader’s cultural horizons. Baym argues that “women authors saw cultivation of the mind as the great key to freedom, the means by which women, learning to think about their situation, could learn how to master it” (“American” 31). The general expectation, however, was that women read uncritically and automatically identified with fictional heroines in novels, and this notion constituted just one of many reasons that cultural

commentators vilified novel reading. John Ruskin wrote in *Sesame and Lilies* that “the best romance becomes dangerous, if, by its excitement, it renders the ordinary course of life uninteresting, and increases the morbid thirst for useless acquaintance with scenes in which we shall never be called upon to act” (164). Not everyone agreed, and since novels had enough clout to be a bad influence, then it stands to reason that some novels could be a good influence. Anthony Trollope believed in the educative power of fiction, and in an 1868 lecture advised listeners that if they “will take some little trouble in the choice of your novels, the lessons which you will find taught in them are good lessons” (85).

Choosing the right novels was critical to a woman reader’s moral and educational development. Hannah More’s call for women to “come forward and contribute their full and fair proportion towards the saving of their country” invested women with a political obligation, but within such calls is embedded another call – the call for “reason”. If novels were written with serious goals in mind - warning about rakes, or calling for social reform - women readers might have the “reason” to interpret these messages and the self-control to heed them. Novels commented on social issues, and studies suggest that in the late eighteenth century new concerns appeared that “reading may teach politically seditious attitudes...challenging the role of the family and the position of women in relation to authority” (Flint 2). Nineteenth-century women’s novels were not all innocent of this charge.

Fiction confirms, questions, and enhances our social and cultural knowledge, and in this dissertation I refine the point by looking within novels to consider reading as a

point of reference. The novels I investigate were chosen for their historical moment, sometimes for their relative obscurity, for their representativeness and for the statements they make about women readers. These nineteenth-century novels span a seventy five year period and complicate the formula in which “a woman’s virtue alone overcomes sexual aggression and transforms male desire into middle-class love” (Armstrong 6). The authors of these novels, in many cases, refuse to force sexual desire to conform to the norms of heterosexual marriage in order to end a novel – that is not their goal. Each of these novels is different in the way it comments on women’s domestic roles, public voices, and the prevailing ideologies of its day, but what they all have in common are heroines who read.

The Coquette and *Belinda* both comment, through threats to domesticity, on the political health of their respective nations. Both novels offer ideas about the reformative powers of domestic reading, and how such reading empowered women in their roles as overseers of the home and family, charged with raising rational, patriotic citizens. While Edgeworth offers domesticity as the seat of women’s political power, Foster argues that relegating women to the home stifles the woman, the family, and the future of the new Republic. *Belinda* Portman maintains her integrity and reforms members of her immediate community, specifically Lady Delacour, suggesting that aristocratic excess must be curbed by responsible women from the middle classes who value education, reason, and morals gained through domestic reading. Such women will reform men, raise leaders, and purge society of upper-class vices – lessons learned from the French Revolution. Foster’s American text features an independent heroine who rejects marriage,

succumbs to seduction and dies, suggesting that the purpose of reading is to reinforce the dominant rhetoric, while warning that such rhetoric holds no future for American women. Both novels reject aristocratic behavior, and both suggest that even the most sparkling, intelligent women must exert influence through their domestic role.

If we consider the question: “What kind of women should we raise?” in relation to these two novels, the answers vary. Edgeworth’s novel offers hope for women who regulate themselves and their reading, and carry those values into their home, and by extension into society. Foster’s bleak vision suggests that for women to survive they must accept the fact that any effort to achieve personal freedom will result in ruin, and the Richman baby’s death suggests that girls are doomed from the start. Her cautionary tale is a scathing critique about the American political system and its cost to women. Through the lens of reading, Foster and Edgeworth comment on women’s education, the role of the family, and the prevailing ideology in turn-of-the-century England and America.

In Chapter Three, which considers *Mansfield Park* and *Hope Leslie*, England and America are suffering from pressing social and political issues, threats to national security, and in both texts patriarchal authority is failing. I was attracted to these novels by the similarity of their nationalist issues, their different approaches to these issues, and the vastly different nature of their heroines as products of Old World versus New World societies. Fanny Price, with her hardscrabble roots but aristocratic connections possesses the sensibility and education necessary to amend social issues that directly impact her. In contrast, Hope Leslie in her spirit, inclusive nature, and extensive reading exemplifies the promise of a new nation that is trying to find a foothold on an imagined path to progress.

Both heroines are avid readers who use their critical thinking faculties to improve their damaged communities. However, Fanny, like Belinda Portman, must quietly reform the old order, while Hope's is a more radical approach that aims toward sweeping political and social change. Reading empowers Fanny and Hope to exert influence, but what are the limits of that influence, and what are the political ramifications that such limits exist at all? In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny leverages her knowledge and liminal position to act as stabilizing agent who can move between classes and expose immoral behavior and excess. In *Hope Leslie*, Hope's democratic reading guides her efforts to destabilize Old World models to construct a more progressive society that will extend its promise of freedom to all of its members. Through Hope and Fanny's examples, readers are encouraged to seek knowledge, use it wisely, and assert themselves in the service of improving society.

Both *Mansfield Park* and *Hope Leslie* tackle issues such as land ownership, slavery, the role of the church and the price of poorly educating women. Fanny Price's education, responsible reading, morality, and steadiness enable her to regulate the behavior of others in the service of social stability, while Hope is a free spirit who is motivated by her conscience and uniquely American ideas about "natural" rights. In contrast to *Mansfield Park's* political critique through class commentary, *Hope Leslie* considers more radical ideas such as the political engagement of women and social justice. Both heroines are guided by reading, but Fanny's influence is through genteel, quiet example, while Hope's influence is through imaginative thought and daring actions commensurate with the promise of an undeveloped nation.

Conflicting ideas about women's domestic roles and national allegiance extend into Chapter Four, where I consider the reading practices of Lucy Snowe in Charlotte's Brontë's *Villette*, and Ellen Montgomery in Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*. These novels complicate the mid-century view of women's reading, domesticity, and nationalism. While Brontë offers a scathing critique of British society (and an even harsher critique of Catholic continental society) through her argument that women must read for utilitarian purposes, Warner champions reading to reinforce domestic roles that will ultimately strengthen the nation. American fiction is replete with commentary on republicanism, expressing the hope that sentimental writing could promote civic stability. Warner's novel promotes guided reading as a means to foster moral improvement, Christian principles and national pride in women readers who were preparing for a public role as republican mothers because, as Nina Baym argues, "the home was where the most important national product – the citizen- was manufactured" ("American" 12). Through reading, Ellen has been molded into a model, middle class American, but ironically, ideal reading is ultimately subordinate to ideal femininity, and when Ellen's autonomy as a reader becomes a threat to patriarchal authority, she must relinquish her books.

Women's roles are also scrutinized in *Villette*, as Brontë examines the plight of the spinster, and critiques both the condition of women and the oppressive English social system responsible for their plight. Through Lucy, Brontë shows readers that an intellectual, independent woman can find a place in the world, although she may have to leave England to do so, as *Villette*'s foreign setting and Lucy's intellectual authority enable her to move past the limited opportunities available to her in England. An

investigation of women's reading in *The Wide, Wide World* and *Villette* elucidates the social and political uses of women's reading, and the possibilities that such reading creates for constructing both personal and national identities. In the nineteenth-century, novels were tools of cultural transmission, and while some novels supported the dominant ideology about women's roles, others were more subversive. Could a nation flourish when half of its citizens were essentially powerless?

Ideas about meaningful work continue into Chapter Five, where I consider the effects of reading in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife*, and Louisa May Alcott's *Work*. In these novels, contradictions between the domestic ideal and the impulse toward reform become clear as their heroines read their way into becoming critical thinkers and useful citizens. In *Work*, Alcott explores the conflict between female independence and domesticity during the Civil War years, while in *The Doctor's Wife*, Braddon considers issues of education, rural reform, and the limits of domesticity. Isabel Gilbert in *The Doctor's Wife* and Christie Devon in *Work* are products of their social circumstances, and both must learn to utilize their moral impulses, personal strengths and economic means to make meaningful personal and social reforms. When upper class romance has worn thin and war has created new ideas about freedom, these heroines recognize opportunities to respond to the needs of their respective societies.

While England was struggling to strike a balance between aristocratic and middle class values, changes in America were positioning women to become more politically active. Isabel's early reading glamorizes aristocratic values, but the novel ends with an accommodation between aristocratic and bourgeois values. There is a visionary element

in Christie's journey, and Alcott's feminist vision of an independent woman living within a female community is progressive. Christie's growth is only possible because of her education, in particular, her reading, which enables her to interpret texts and people in deeper ways. *The Doctor's Wife* and *Work* both feature heroines who revise their own reading practices to become educated, productive citizens who use their skills to enact meaningful change. These critically underserved novels are themselves a form of social reform writing, advocating for issues relevant in their day and calling upon readers to embrace such changes themselves.

I have shown, through an examination of these eight texts, how the fictional woman reader was an important source of identification and political choice for the novel reader. In a century when formal education remained sparse for girls and young women, fiction was a powerful political and social influence. I hope the conclusions I have advanced illuminate how the social critique in women's novels developed differently in England and America as a product of two very different cultural and historical circumstances. Debate about women's legal rights, marriage, education and work occurred in print, and literature that addresses these topics explores the competing ideologies of those who championed a domestic role versus those who supported women's ventures beyond the home. Through the lens of reading, I have explored shifting concepts of domesticity, work, and gender roles to consider how reading recasts ideas of nation.

In the nineteenth-century, "domesticity" was a powerful construct that kept women from the public sphere. However, if domesticity plays a key role in the

construction of the middle class, then it stands to reason that it also plays a key role in imagining the nation as home, making women major players in defining the parameters of “nation.” By mining the cultural circumstances behind the woman reader, I consider how national histories were shaped by the construction of the domestic and womanly ideal. Society was changing, and the modern political state was formed by this shifting culture. Novels helped define what constituted a “household” during a period when both England and America were riddled by changing ideas about government, capitalism, and the home. The novel’s real danger was its power to make readers reconsider their positions within society. Women who learned to think critically about their social and political position could learn to control it. Fictional women readers set an example about appropriate reading and responsible actions that empowered novel readers to reach beyond the home and improve their own lives, their communities, and their nation. We cannot investigate the phenomenon of the woman reader without considering her from a transatlantic perspective, gathering an understanding of the politics, history, and literature that shaped her and by extension, the world.

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