

GENRE BENDING: THE WORK OF AMERICAN
WOMEN'S WRITING, 1860-1925

By

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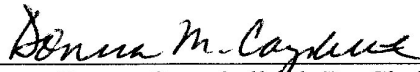
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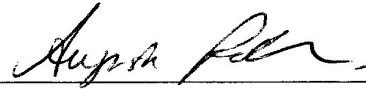
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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of JESSICA E. MCCARTHY find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.



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Abstract

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This study examines the uses and usefulness of genre classifications by studying novels by American women writers that blend, bend, or borrow from more than one literary genre. By examining the ways women construct themselves as authors in the literary marketplace, this study also explores the ways women authors are retroactively constructed by critics. When reading women's works as participating in a specific genre, it is imperative to remain aware of the fact that many of these definitions did not initially consider women's writing. Just as our perception of the canon has shifted, so must we recognize that generic hybridity allows for new readings of texts by destabilizing traditional means of organizing literary works. As the literary canon has expanded to include more works by women writers, it is critical that we step back and reevaluate the usefulness of the genre classifications upon which we have relied. This study looks at these genre-bending texts and assesses how they work to challenge, subvert, or reinforce the cultural, social, and political milieu from which they arise.

The texts examined in this project include the following: Louisa May Alcott's *Hospital Sketches* (1863), a novel that can be read as existing on the border between

sentimental literature and benevolence literature; Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Silent Partner* (1871), an example of benevolence literature and reformist literature with a sentimental leaning where the female character's position of economic influence allows for a discussion of women's roles in an increasingly industrial society; Kate Chopin's *At Fault* (1890), a novel that relies on multiple genres in order to effectively contain its multiple plots; Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Custom of the Country* (1913), novels that together demonstrate the degree to which an author's use of a single genre, in this case literary naturalism, can evolve during the course of her career; and finally, Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground* (1925), a novel that provides a meta-critique of genre by engaging literary naturalism at the moment of transition to modernism.

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This dissertation is dedicated to Andrew,
for all that he is and all that he inspires me to be.

INTRODUCTION

Genre Bending

“Darwin would not have been possible if he had not been preceded by Linnaeus, that is to say, if one had not already laid the theoretical and methodological basis permitting to describe and define the species which are subject to change.”

—Claude Lévi-Strauss

Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging.

—Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre”

This project is born largely out of the challenges facing any student of literature. Rare is the student who has never entered an orientation, or a classroom, or even a casual conference conversation without facing one of the most ubiquitous of all inquiries: “What do you study?” The answers, many practiced ahead of time in an effort to maintain an appearance of focus and competence, often follow a familiar formula consisting of time period plus nation. As students become more advanced in their studies modifiers are added, and “nineteenth-century American literature” is transformed into the conglomerate “nineteenth-century American women’s literature.” Graduate students have been known to make light of these modifications, teasing that the more time one spends in school, the more adjectives one earns, until the answer is a very specialized “nineteenth American women’s literature and the manipulation of generic conventions.” The implied joke is that students arrive in university classrooms with the intent to study “literature” and leave with a degree in “literature written in a specific period of time, by a specific group of people, who have done more or less the same thing with their literary projects and

therefore can be the subject of a dissertation.” No, it really isn’t much in the way of a snappy punch-line but few students specifically study humor.

What the addition of so many modifiers suggests, in addition to specialization, is that the way we currently organize literary works may be insufficient. The multiplicity of modifiers should draw our attention to current critical terms’ inability to effectively encapsulate so many of the concerns addressed by literary scholars. Or this moment may serve as an opportunity for us to assert the importance of those things we study within a larger historical period—not *just* nineteenth-century literature but nineteenth-century literature *by women*.

Of course criticism of periodization is not new, but contemplating the artificiality of that means of classification is useful because it allows us to begin examining the ways in which genre may also attempt to encapsulate literary works within artificial boundaries. Also, if articulating our interests in terms of historical period and country of origin is proving to be an incomplete representation of what we do, then examining one of the other ways we classify literary texts—by their possession of qualities we associate with specific genres—is a useful way to begin expanding both how we articulate what we study as well as why these inquiries are useful both inside and outside of the confines of English departments.

Interestingly, the aforementioned formula, humorous though it may be in its oversimplified reduction of the complicated process that is specialization, leaves little room for the introduction of genre. Though a literary scholar might spend countless hours examining the ways Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris depict Darwinism’s relationship to gender through the manner in which naturalist heroines are clothed, many students

would be reluctant to answer an inquiry into their field of study with so simple a reply as “naturalism.” The fact that genre alone does not seem a legitimate description of one’s efforts speaks to our difficulty understanding what genre is, what genre does, and what genre means.

A genre can be defined as the classification of a literary form or type; “novel” being an example of the former and “romance” being an example of the latter. Because these terms can be used to create divisions between texts they can feel constricting and restrictive to students or to writers. Few, if any of us, would want to be described in so singular a manner and literary texts seem to share that aversion. However, this does not render genres unhelpful to literary scholars. Instead we might consider that generic terms of literary classification may be, in fact, much more inclusive than they appear and our urge to modify, to specify, speaks to our inherent misunderstanding of generic capacity for inclusion. Perhaps “realism” is a large enough term to contain a vast array of authorial interpretations of that classification but we, as readers, are too accustomed to constituting definitions based upon a narrow set of samples. Genres, by definition, need not be rigid structures incapable of expanding and accommodating. Perhaps rather than visualizing them as the boxes in a grid or cubed compartments on a shelf—an easy visualization to reach given the way books are so often stored—we should imagine them as indeterminate shapes, made of a flexible material, that can bend and stretch as their contents shift.

The usefulness of an extended examination of genre can be articulated by any teacher of literature who has attempted to help students access a particularly difficult text. For example, in an effort to make Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* a bit friendlier to the uninitiated nineteen-year-old reader, an explanation of genre can be similar to

providing the combination to a lock. By explaining the common characteristics of a novel of manners, students are given the means of gaining a foothold in the text. Rather than merely floundering through the first few pages of Ralph Touchett's witty banter, readers can be actively searching for evidence of how James's novel is participating in that genre or, conversely, how the given definition might be challenged by his text. Of course, informing students of a text's genre prior to their own engagement with it can feel a bit like stacking the deck or manipulating the experiment to prove a hypothesis. One could argue that providing an explanation of the novel before the novel has been read allows little or no room for new generic definitions to take shape. We might be said to encourage a sort of generic profiling where we judge a text on the basis of its associations rather than its own actions. However, genre may be where classroom discussions often begin but it is rarely, if ever, where they end. Even the least indoctrinated student of literature is often quick to point out the exception to the rule. This progression only makes sense. If genre is a means of classifying texts then genres are, quite clearly, definitions born out of exclusion. A genre is what it is not. A text that participates in a specific genre is in possession of certain traits because it is not in possession of others.¹ The process of defining genres means that even when viewing a text as participating in a genre we must always be conscious of the ways that it withholds and refuses to conform.

Any literary scholar's relationship to genre is a complicated one. Though all literary terms contain a degree of slippage and any expert when asked to define a term related to their work will always take care to include possible exceptions, genre

¹ The decision to use "participate" rather than "belong" in reference to a text's relationship to genre is explained in the epigraph to this essay, a point further articulated by Jacques Derrida in "The Law of Genre."

classifications are some of the most notoriously difficult definitions to pin down. For example, it is substantially easier to describe the specific characteristics of a sonnet—even with the differences between the Shakespearean and the Petrarchan varieties—than it is to provide an exhaustive list of the characteristics of American literary realism. While genres provide useful ways for us to begin discussing a text they also limit the degree to which we feel the text can be adequately described. If we do not describe a text in terms of genre, perhaps in an effort to avoid creating expectations for other readers, our conversation seems somehow incomplete. However, if we rely solely upon preexisting generic definitions to summarize a text, there is the nagging sense that not enough information has been provided. This is the weakness of genre. It does too much and it does not do enough, often simultaneously. Our struggles with genre speak directly to the importance of continually engaging it in new ways. Were genre really an empty field of inquiry, it would hardly be capable of posing so many challenges for literary scholars.²

Admittedly, examining the implications of genre is not a new endeavor. In fact many important theoretical studies of genre were published more than twenty years prior to this project taking shape. In their *Theory of Literature* (1956), René Wellek and Austin Warren devoted a chapter to examining the historical progression of the way genre had been studied and understood, beginning with classical works by Aristotle. Wellek and Warren provide useful insights into how genre might have shaped texts by authors ranging from John Milton to Charles Dickens, only to suggest that “great writers are

² Literature is not, of course, the only medium for which genre poses complications. Many interesting examinations have been undertaken regarding genre’s relationship to film, television, and mass media such as advertising.

rarely inventors of genres” (235). For Wellek and Warren, good writers do not create genres so much as they adapt the available aesthetic devices that their readers will be able to readily comprehend. The conclusion the authors reach is that critics ought to approach genre primarily in terms of form or, as they say, “generalize Hudibastic octosyllabics or the sonnet rather than the political novel or the novel about factory workers,” because they are interested in kinds of literature rather than in literary subjects (233). Their approach, though well explained, fails to take into account the fact that subject matter can dictate form and vice versa, this is especially true in examples of “genre fiction” such as detective novels or science fiction. The context and content of a novel can impact the author’s decision to use or reject formal elements just as the color of a specific sunset might cause a painter to select cadmium red over vermilion. Also, as specific literary forms, such as the novel, become popular and persist over a long period of time, the umbrella classification of “novel” fails to meet the needs of readers or scholars.

Beyond Genre (1972), by Paul Hernardi, attempts to provide a more extensive and detailed examination of genre criticism in order to demonstrate the range of approaches to that subject. Hernardi ultimately champions an approach to genre that allows for classification on the basis of similarities and relationships rather than the adherence to narrow traditions, a descriptive rather than prescriptive approach (8). Though much of Hernardi’s text is historical in focus, he makes several projections for the continued relevance of genre studies and assigns theorists who succeed him to “explore how the best generic concepts propounded in the last few decades may become integrated into a set of interlocking ‘systems’” (153). Hernardi’s model, after all, relies on the intersection of structure and mimesis, form and function. Rather than accepting the argument for an

emphasis on form, this argument also goes so far as to take reader reaction into account, specifically the range of emotions specifically associated with various genres. This hint towards the significant relationship between the author and the reader, rather than isolating the author and the text while aligning the reader and critic, is useful to studies such as this one which argue for the text as a space in which reader and author can interact and, in the best instances, use the literary text as a liminal space in which to imagine solutions that might seem unreasonable in an alternate context.

The move to destabilize older, more formal approaches to genre, as well as the strongly asserted belief that the old ways of conceiving genre are no longer wholly relevant, or even vital, is further explored in Alastair Fowler's *Kinds of Literature* (1982). Fowler goes to great lengths in his efforts to theorize genre as it pertains to critics, which is interesting, but he also alludes to a possible area of future inquiry: examining how readers acquire generic knowledge. The "acquisition of generic competence" is not a linear process for Fowler and he carefully explains that some readers seem almost innately able to understand the mechanics of particular genres while other genres may be more complex to and first require that readers have prolonged exposure to related genres (44-45). Though his examination of generic acquisition is not fully developed in this text, Fowler does gesture towards one of the largest factors that would need to be taken into account if one were to examine the phenomenon, the fact that "genres change continually" (45). This has led, he believes, to genres being elevated to a level of very high abstraction. However, for Fowler genres are not unlike inert gases; "uniformly stable, equally tenuous, [and] predictably inactive" in their own historical period (45). The challenge to fully comprehending genres; however, comes from the fact that they do

not remain stable as time passes and critics are able to view literary movements from a distance.

Another difficulty is not merely readers' perception but that genres refuse to be contained by history. Occasionally a dormant or retired genre will be recycled by an author intent on generic revival and resuscitation, a phenomenon Gérard Genette deems "generic contamination" because when the original form is revived it becomes tainted with the influence of contemporary history and all that has transpired since its initial death (210). Though the word contamination is provocative in its associations, for the study at hand which will examine works that simultaneously participate and/or manipulate existing generic conventions "mutation" might be a better word. Rather than suggesting that there ever was a pure genre, a stable genre untainted by outside influence, this project will argue that genres bear much greater similarity to living organisms that can be directly bred to enhance a specific characteristic—much in the same manner that practitioners of animal husbandry select breeding partners to increase the likelihood of reproducing desired traits—or that genres themselves can adapt to the needs of a text in order to better serve the needs of both author and reader.

As this brief summary of a few studies shows that much useful and exciting work has been done in genre studies, as of late there has been a surge of interest in this topic of inquiry. In a recent special issue of *PMLA* (October 2007), "Remapping Genres," theorists including Wai Chee Dimock, John Frow, and Bruce Robbins pose some very important questions regarding the usefulness of literary genres. Robbins goes so far as to ask, "Why should we care about genre?" and then asks the reader to imagine a future in which literature departments hired faculty on the basis of genre specialization rather than

period specialization (1644). Such a shift would certainly change the way graduate students answer the ubiquitous question of focus. Rather than beginning with date and place, one might simply answer “naturalism” or “the romance.” Of course, one may modify a genre as many times as one may modify a time period by shifting lines of demarcation. While historical periods and national boundaries are admittedly artificial—one year can affect and extend into the next just as easily as an author may travel across borders—identifying one’s area of specialization might allow for increased flexibility in literary studies. Just as literary movements resist neatly conforming to dates—so do literary works resist neatly conforming to genres. Robbins notes that genres are often criticized for being too conservative, too restrictive (1645). However, as generic definitions expand so might our fields of study expand, hopefully to adapt and accommodate shifting scholarly pursuits. Yet, the perceived rigidity of period and national boundaries could just as easily make its way into genre definitions so that scholars who feel particularly proprietary about their work attempt to fortify rather than perforate generic boundaries. Robbins argues that organizing English department faculty around genre sounds risky because “critics are sure that genres couldn’t stand the pressure that would thereby be placed on them” (1644). However, he goes on to argue that ultimately genre strengthens literature because it draws our attention to the fact that literature is historical as well as literary. By examining the historical moments that surround the development of literary genres we are reminded that literature is not created in a purely artistic bubble, though authorial imagination plays a significant role, texts are largely the product of their social, historical, political, and cultural environment.

For both John Frow and Wai Chee Dimock, genres are analogous to families—a group sharing some recognizable similarities but destined to change from generation to generation. For Dimock this means that “genre is not just a theory of classification but, perhaps even more crucially, a theory of interconnection” (74). The importance of genres as relationships rather than distinctions is important if we are to understand how genres can maintain flexible and still hold their value for readers. Of course, if we push the kinship analogy a bit further, which the project at hand can be seen as doing though not in so many words, and draw on what seems to be a relatively common occurrence in even the most amiable and tightly knit group of relatives, members of any given genre are to question and critique their fellow members without being expelled from the larger group. Sibling texts might show signs of rivalry or dispute without either being necessarily excluded from the group.

Interpreting works that participate in genres as familial in nature can, however, be problematic because there is the suggestion that texts and authors are consciously participating in generic conventions. This becomes difficult to reconcile with the fact that many genres are retro-fitted onto literature, that is, the very classifications ascribed to texts by scholars often come about well after the texts themselves have been produced. Genre often exists after the fact, because we need it as a sorting mechanism—a way to know where the things we study begin and where they end, a way to make reading lists and, eventually, possess a sense of mastery, of having read all the major works of a particular “ism,” i.e. realism, modernism, naturalism, regionalism, or sentimentalism, etc. In order to really make the analogy of family work then we have to recognize that families themselves do not necessarily adhere to a specific ideal. Genres too can divorce,

remarry, adopt, or even discover offspring we did not know they had. This is especially likely to take place when we revise our assumptions about which texts deserve an extensive genealogical probe.

It might seem that the recent surge of interest in genre theory and genre formation is part of a “back to basics” move to reformalize the study of literature through jargon that would be immediately recognizable to those outside the academy—a way to assert that the study of literature really is literary rather than historical or sociological—and therefore create an argument for the legitimacy of literature departments. However, to banish modes of literary inquiry that encourage interdisciplinarity goes against any modern notion of genre because to do so asserts that the genre of literature is inflexible, something we have well established that genres are not. Instead, this particular study of genre is timely because it asks us not to reject critical work that has come before but to pause and reevaluate the results of our labors. The surge of interest in women’s writing in the later half of the twentieth century means that the canon of American literature has been opened up and expanded to include texts by female authors. Though the literary canon has expanded greatly in recent decades, oftentimes our understandings of genres have not.

Rather than only theorizing genre in an abstract manner, this study seeks to examine both the uses and usefulness of genre by examining a small group of novels by American women writers that can be argued to blend, bend, or borrow from more than one literary genre. There may seem to be an inherent contradiction in acknowledging the potential artificiality of generic classification while simultaneously utilizing it as a means of evaluating works of literature, however, these texts help to illustrate that genre

boundaries themselves are not inflexible or rigid. Literary critics, not the texts we study, are responsible for establishing concrete generic definitions and perpetuating these classifications without acknowledging their inherent porosity. Genres define, yes, but once they become too defined they become static and useless. Just as the expanded canon requires us to consider the notion that inclusivity eliminates the potential for mastery, so must we recognize that generic hybridity allows for new readings of texts though it destabilizes traditional means of organizing literary works.

As the chapters of this dissertation will demonstrate, women writers must operate within the sphere of their chosen genre so as meet their readers' expectations and provide a reading experience that is likely to encourage a sustained readership. As many of the authors included in this study were writing and publishing as a means of providing financial support for themselves or their families, it was important that they not experiment to a degree that might alienate a paying reading public. Of course this does not mean that texts produced by professional women writers are without art, on the contrary. In order to satisfy the needs of both the reader and the text, authors had to negotiate the distance between what they were attempting to express and what mode would be best received by their audience. The awareness of audience and the desire for popularity, and thereby profitability, need not suggest that these authors are mercenary. If anything, the willingness to engage audience need shows that these writers were both thinking and thoughtful. Also, given that the definitions for genre—unless we are speaking about a genre typically associated primarily with women writers, such as sentimental literature—were developed with the works of male writers providing the blueprints, it should come as no surprise that women's texts frequently appear to engage

genres but are often not considered to be classic examples of the genres in which they participate. Generic hybridity is certainly not limited to women's writing but if we consider women's writing as a genre in and of itself then the variations are slightly more manageable than if we were to embark on a search for generic experimentation in all of literature.

Though all historical moments might be defined as periods of transition, the years included in this study were a notable time of change in the United States. During this period the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, the American Civil War ended, the women's suffrage movement began, the telephone was invented and World War I forever changed the way the world would understand major conflicts. Though these events are but a few marks on a sixty year timeline they are representative of the many milestones that changed America's understanding of itself as a nation, as well as domestic race relations, the role of women in society, and the impact of technology and industry on life as it had previously been known. These moments of change, in addition to challenging how Americans and American writers interpreted the world around them, created fissures in the social system, spaces in which experimentation both with form and content was facilitated. Just as the no-man's land of World War I can be seen as a metaphor for the liminal space in which poets such as T. S. Eliot challenged the validity of existing social and political systems, so can each of these moments of change—and then some—be read as opportunities for new voices to join the national conversation. If genres are to be interpreted as “tools for organizing knowledge about and attitudes towards the discursive worlds they constitute and refer to,” as John Frow suggests they are, then as their referents change a degree of generic experimentation is to absolutely be expected

(“Reproducibles” 1633). The way we understand genres must necessarily change as we adapt our understanding of the world we inhabit.

In every chapter of this project the contemporary reviews are considered in order to understand how critics that encountered these texts in their immediate historical context understood genres to apply. Almost none of the reviews make any explicit references to genres by name, though they do admire characteristics or traits that we now associate with formally established literary groups. As mentioned earlier, the application of genre after the fact can be difficult to reconcile with efforts to understand literary works on their own terms, however, it is important to note that the contemporary reviews examined are often not primarily concerned with understanding these texts from the standpoint of literary criticism. Instead, they are primarily critical pieces published in popular press outlets and they are specifically tailored to address what the author sees as the concerns of the publication’s readership or the demographic they identify as especially likely to read the novel. For example, reviews of almost all of the authors included in this study comment, at least in some way, on the relationship between the author’s artistic skill and her gender, with many of them providing backhanded compliments reminiscent of “she writes very well for a woman.” So while these reviews provide a useful way of assessing how the authors’ contemporaries may have understood genre, they are not rhetorically neutral in any way and almost always possess an agenda of their own. Some of the earliest recognition of the fact that these texts might be participating in multiple genres comes in early twentieth century literary criticism where

scholars read these texts as belonging to a single very specific genre but do acknowledge there to be traces of other influence.³

Of course, the purpose of this project is not simply to theorize genre, though that is, to a degree, inevitable. This study examines novels that can be identified as participating in more than a single literary classification and uses them to explore how women writers manipulate genre and if these manipulations differ from those of their male contemporaries. This study then looks at these genre-bending texts and assesses how they work to challenge, subvert, or reinforce the cultural, social, and political milieu from which they arise. Though texts by male writers certainly participate in multiple genres as well, texts by women writers are often placed in the precarious position of having to balance the author's femininity and readers' expectations of what women's writing "should" be with the writer's desire to make a statement of even just begin a conversation in favor of challenging traditional gender roles. As a result, women writers often write to meet readers' needs while also attempting to subvert the restrictive nature of gendered genres so as to create literary products that are broader in scope. The novels selected for this study are unique in that each clearly demonstrates the author's attempt to grapple with the challenges of treating issues that are pertinent to women within the confines of a literary tradition that is and has been dictated by men. For example, every chapter includes a novel in that examines either marriage or women who work outside the home, in most cases, both. The ubiquity of these topics suggests that women writers were attempting to spark a conversation with their readers about whether or not these aspects

³ A good example of this is in chapter four when critics suggest that there is something naturalistic about Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, though they do not fully pursue that line of inquiry.

of women's lives were fulfilling and to what degree. Interestingly, though many of the novels do make what might be considered a feminist argument, none do so in a manner which would alienate more conservative readers. The careful manner in which these topics are handled speaks volumes about each author's ability to understand her readership.

Though the range of texts included in this project is relatively small when one considers the vast amount of writing published by women in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, each novel has been selected because it serves as an excellent example of either genre blending or genre bending. That is, each text participates in multiple genres simultaneously to a degree which can be largely measured as self-conscious and aware or the novels demonstrate the author's attempts to reconsider and reimagine the conventions of a genre as it changes as over the course of her literary career.

The first novel included in this study, examined in chapter one, is Louisa May Alcott's popular *Hospital Sketches* (1863). Alcott's novel can be read as existing on the border between sentimental literature and benevolence literature. Recognizing Alcott's work as an early specimen of benevolence literature broadens the possibilities for a nuanced interpretation of *Hospital Sketches* and, possibly, her other works, especially "My Contraband" (1863) and "Transcendental Wild Oats" (1873). Also, her relationship to the transcendentalists provides her with a particularly strong vantage point from which to illuminate the shortcomings of their philosophies, specifically their exclusion of women, minorities, and those who are ill-equipped for a life of Emersonian self-reliance. The fact that Alcott's narrator is employed by the military during a time of historical

crisis, the Civil War, may be read as partly enabling her decision not to adhere to a single genre and as requiring her to move away from older literary forms. Finally, by beginning with Alcott's text we are able to engage potential problems with benevolence and the ways in which it reinforces hierarchical relationships between women. This weighs upon the larger conversation by suggesting that there generic hierarchies exist even within women's writing.

While examining how women's writing can blend existing genres and draw attention to their limitations, this study also examines how reading texts as generically hybrid encourages readers to observe the development of literary movements. In addition to Alcott's work, chapter two of this study looks closely at Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Silent Partner* (1871) as an example of benevolence literature and reformist literature with a sentimental leaning. This chapter develops the argument first posited in the Alcott chapter regarding benevolence literature's reliance on the subjugation of one group of women in order for another to claim benevolence. Also, the placement of a female character in a position of economic influence allows for a discussion of women's roles in an increasingly industrial society. Even the contradiction inherent in the title reinforces a female protagonist's inability to speak despite her privileged position. Contemporary critical discomfort with Phelps's novel and twentieth-century critics' difficulty reconciling seemingly contradictory attitudes towards labor, both demonstrate the effects of disrupting readers' generic expectations. This novel is a particularly interesting example of an author's generic fluency given the immense success of Phelps's first novel, *Gates Ajar* (1868). Understanding Phelps's earlier work as perhaps more strictly conforming to generic boundaries enables us to examine why *The Silent Partner* might

not. Also important to understanding the generic implications of Phelps's novel is the author's preface in which she makes clear the degree to which this work of fiction relies upon historical documents, specifically labor reports. Not only does Phelps experiment with genre in her novel, she pushes the boundaries of the novel genre itself.

The discussion of the challenges facing women in positions of authority, begun in chapter two, continues in chapter three's examination of Kate Chopin's *At Fault* (1890). Chopin's novel's reliance on multiple genres further complicated this discussion because here hybridity is dependent upon and the result of it being a problem novel of sorts; a place where Chopin experiments with naturalist themes but does not carry them to their typically bleak conclusion, instead ending her novel with a marriage and a falsely happy ending. In addition, the diversity of the novel's characters and plot lines makes it not only possible, but largely necessary, that Chopin employ more than a single genre. The result is that in order to engage issues of race and industrialization in a novel that is so superficially interested in its characters' romantic lives, Chopin must create a creole genre of sorts. By placing multiple genres in conversation they overlap and intertwine, the result being a creolized genre that is simultaneously able to bear the weight of conventions typically associated with sentimentalism, realism, naturalism, and regionalism.

Though some novels, such as Chopin's, appear hybrid as the result of artistic experimentation, this dissertation also examines works that do not straddle or bridge genres so much as demonstrate the evolution of a single genre during the course of an author's career. By examining how a single author revisits and revises a genre we are better able to understand the instability of literary classifications. In order to accomplish

this task, chapter four examines Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Custom of the Country* (1913). In each of these novels Wharton creates a naturalist character, Lily Bart in the first novel and Undine Spragg in the second, whose relationships to compulsive behavior, money, and an obsessive desire to be seen are illustrative of the author's changing relationship to literary naturalism. In the first novel, the main character is subjected to the fate many naturalist heroine's share and the author is able to clearly demonstrate the corrupt nature of a society that would allow for and facilitate the death of Lily Bart. In the second novel, however, Undine Spragg demonstrates a mastery of the social situation that was so detrimental to her predecessor and, in turn, allows Wharton to continue using naturalism, only this time as a means of commenting on the negative impact of the evolutionary process if society is to be viewed as an environment hostile to sustaining life.

While Wharton is indeed conscious of the ways she manipulates genre, her text does not self-consciously comment upon them. A novel that does take up a self-aware critique of genre is Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground*. Not only does *Barren Ground* engage both naturalism and modernism, but it comments upon the former explicitly. The novel's protagonist directly criticizes naturalist behaviors in other characters, and Glasgow uses tropes of that genre to establish a foundation for her story. Once this foundation is built, Glasgow subverts and twists naturalist tropes. One might be tempted to argue that Glasgow's novel prefigures postmodernism; however, *Barren Ground* suggests that the generic pastiche we associate with postmodernism is not necessarily specific to late-twentieth century works but only becomes more overt later in the century. Glasgow's novel also serves as a useful bookend to this discussion because, like Alcott,

she was also responding to an environment of war and upheaval. Through her manipulation of generic conventions, Ellen Glasgow is able to demonstrate the limitations of naturalism for writers who wish to provide their characters, especially female ones, with an opportunity to determine their own fate regardless of the widely accepted belief in determinism. Though not consciously, *Barren Ground* also builds upon Wharton's argument that those character types who are too firmly rooted in the past—who are essentially unable to overcome their social genres—will be rendered obsolete by those who can adapt. This might be seen as a comment upon the larger project as a whole if we consider that author's who are inflexible may be likely to produce texts that do not respond to reader needs and are, as a result, destined to be forgotten. The irrelevance of singularly generic texts may speak largely to why popular but formulaic genre fictions—romances, mysteries, and science fiction, for example—rarely make their way into the literary canon.

By examining the ways women construct themselves as authors in the literary marketplace, this study also explores the ways women authors are retroactively constructed by critics. When reading women's works as participating in a specific genre, it is imperative that we remain aware of the fact that the definitions of these categories did not initially consider women's writing. Just as our perception of the canon has shifted, so must we recognize that generic hybridity allows for new readings of texts by destabilizing traditional means of organizing literary works. Yet, this study concludes that for the mess we might make, the new connections we forge are all the stronger and all the better for it.

CHAPTER ONE

“Gentler Tendance”: The Benevolent Maternalism of Alcott’s *Hospital Sketches*

“The matron’s motherly face brought more comfort to many a poor soul,
than the cordial draughts she administered, of the cheery words that welcomed all,
making of the hospital a home.”

Louisa May Alcott, *Hospital Sketches*

It seems markedly appropriate that the first chapter in a study of women writers and the manipulation of genre—both the author’s conscious decision to shape a text’s meaning and reception by actively constructing the text to meet the criteria of more than one genre and the ability of a text to exist in multiple classifications simultaneously while working towards a productive end—should closely examine the writings of Louisa May Alcott. As Elaine Showalter notes in her introduction to *Alternative Alcott*, the popular author of the *Little Women* novels increased her literary output by very determinedly teaching herself to write with her left hand in addition to her right (ix). Ambidexterity meant more hours could be spent writing and more pages completed for publication. Though Showalter views Alcott’s feat as metaphorical for the female author’s double life, it might also be seen as metaphorical for the dual nature of texts produced by a female author. Just as Alcott learned to multiply her literary output by training herself to write with both hands, so do her texts demonstrate multiplicity in their ability to be simultaneously situated in two genres. Engaging multiple genres simultaneously allows the author to construct a text that functions at both primary and secondary levels. For Alcott this means texts which are both commercially successful and able to meet readers’ expectations for “women’s writing” while also allowing the author an artistic space in

which to explore and critique social issues, such as slavery, to which her typical readership might have initially been less receptive.

In order to fully understand what is at stake in Alcott's active manipulation of her texts—beyond the physical feat of ambidexterity—it is useful to consider her reputation as a writer. Beloved in her time, Alcott's popular reputation is highlighted in Fanny E. Coe's diminutive, early-twentieth-century biography, *Little Louisa Alcott*, which includes no small amount of moralizing for the benefit of the text's presumably young readers and Alcott fans. As part of Coe's simplified biographical sketch to accompany *The Louisa Alcott Storybook*, she acknowledges that "Louisa had a very hot temper." However, according to Coe, the benevolent faith of her mother, Mrs. Alcott, encouraged Louisa to imagine that she might "conquer her great failing" and gain "self-control." As the result of what seems like a mother's saintly patience, Louisa was able to consciously change her ways. Rather than crediting Louisa with self-transformation, however, Coe emphasizes maternal influence. Interestingly, the metanarrative here suggests that Coe internalized Alcott's fictionalized account of her struggle for emotional control and patience, represented by Jo March in *Little Women* (1868), and has transformed that fiction back into biographical fact. For Coe, the transformation of Alcott's disposition is a very happy improvement that enables the author to set a positive example for young readers. As a result, the biography concludes with a euphoric description of Alcott as having become a "devoted daughter, sister, and friend" who published "books so true and sound and sweet that children unto the third generation are arising to call her blessed"

(12).⁴ The suggestion that a benevolent mothering figure can positively impact an impressionable mind is a common trope of nineteenth-century literature, not in any way unique to Coe's nostalgic musings. However, despite its adherence to convention, *Little Louisa Alcott* takes a subtle but significant turn at the end. For Coe, the happily-ever-after occurs not simply when Louisa learns to keep her temper in check but when the tables turn and Alcott is transformed from a girl who received her mother's benevolence to a woman able to return the favor. Coe concludes her brief biographical rendering with what she sees as Alcott's greatest achievement; the installation of a new furnace for Mrs. Alcott and the financial capacity to make her mother secure and "cosy." The biographer quotes Alcott's pleased description of her mother as now being afforded the luxury of "sit[ting] in a pleasant room, with no work, no care, no worry, but peace and comfort all about her, and children glad and able to stand between her and trouble" (12).⁵ For Coe, a mother's investment in her children is most amply returned by their ability to assume the role of caregiver in adulthood. Emphasis on the benefits of parental influence and a strong mother-child bond in a biographical sketch intended for children comes as no surprise, nor does the implication that a child's duty is to one day care for her own aging parents. While the lessons taught by Coe's biographical sketch may be expected, the

⁴ The Coe biography was located at the Washington State University Holland Library, crushed behind other Alcott publications in the Dewey compact storage. Though the cover remains, the title page has been removed by a previous reader. The second and third to last pages contain a listing of Alcott publications from Little, Brown, & Company, 34 Beacon Street, Boston, MA. There are no dates within this volume, nor is it listed on Worldcat.org. However, there appears to have been a collection of Alcott stories edited by Coe and published by Little, Brown, & Company, without and including a biographical sketch in 1910 and 1917, respectively. Though the bibliographic information for this text is somewhat uncertain, that fact does not disrupt our ability to read Coe's book as signifying the ways in which Alcott was repackaged and read.

⁵ It is interesting to note that the pinnacle of comfort for Mrs. Alcott is exactly the domestic fate that neither Jo March or Tribulation Periwinkle can stand in the opening pages of *Little Women* and *Hospital Sketches*. This certainly suggests that Alcott, perhaps due to generational difference and a personal desire for active occupation, may have valued domesticity only so long as it was not imposed upon her.

implications of this dynamic are still intriguing to a twenty-first century reader of Alcott's work. A hundred years after the publication of *Little Louisa Alcott*, "maternalism" has assumed implications beyond the scope of familial interactions and the female author can be seen as performing maternalism in multiple ways—exploring it within the text, exercising it towards her readers, and potentially establishing a relationship of that nature between herself and the text she produces.

Literary scholars examining nineteenth-century American women's benevolence writings illuminate the ways in which female authors construct charitably-minded female characters to question contemporary gender roles and to challenge the limited parameters of socially acceptable women's work, both issues which would have been particularly close to home for women writers. In *Our Sisters' Keepers* (2005), edited by Jill Bergman and Debra Bernardi, contributors demonstrate the ways women writers evoke empathy and, as the result of having elicited an emotional response, advocate for a range of characters who lack the means to represent themselves in public discourse or are underrepresented in print. Though many of these marginalized figures, such as poor women and minorities, were represented in Christian literature published by organizations that included the American Bible Society (1816), the American Sunday School Union (1824), and the American Tract Society (1825), the rhetorical strategy of those publications certainly affected the manner in which these groups were treated. The American Tract Society had a tremendously wide circulation, publishing five million pages annually by the late 1820's; however, the representation of women and minorities in these publications serves a distinctly didactic Protestant purpose (Gutjahr 45). Rather than inspiring women to pursuing benevolent actions as a means of asserting their own

autonomy, tracts such as “Tract No. 175: To Mothers” reaffirm the importance of women’s place in the domestic sphere and argue that a mother’s duty is to pray and commit her children to God (55-58). The emphasis on focusing the female gaze both inward and heaven-ward suggests a limited view of women’s roles and their sphere of influence. However, as the introduction to Bergman and Bernardi’s collection of essays suggests, women writers of fiction also demonstrated that women were interested in improving themselves through education and by becoming involved with benevolent organizations. These activities provided “the opportunity to function in the public sphere while upholding the expectations of nineteenth-century womanhood” (Bergman and Bernardi 8). The editors’ introduction and “Women’s Charity vs. Scientific Philanthropy in Sarah Orne Jewett,” an essay by Monika Elbert, note the tension between the female employment of benevolent acts and the skepticism with which romantic male authors viewed charity. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Blithedale Romance* are noted as being exceptionally critical of philanthropic endeavors.⁶

Though *Hospital Sketches* is not treated within the aforementioned collection of essays, a close look at Alcott’s context and text, described by Laura Laffrado as a mixture of “travel narrative, letters, and sketches based on [Alcott’s] Civil War nursing experience,” reveals a complex work which can undoubtedly be classified as an early example of benevolence literature (71). Situating *Hospital Sketches* within the genre of

⁶ Of course Hawthorne’s novel is considered a critique of the Transcendentalists’ attempts to establish a commune at Brook Farm, a project Alcott herself satirizes in “Transcendental Wild Oats.” Though they both critique the commune project and Hawthorne does examine the limitations of gender to a degree, Hawthorne’s emphasis is more largely upon the idealism of the venture as a whole, whereas Alcott takes a more blatantly gendered approach, directly and repeatedly criticizing male participation, or lack thereof, in this project. Both Alcott’s essay and Hawthorne’s novel are addressed in more depth later in this chapter.

benevolence writing, however, should not be seen as a limited or limiting diagnosis. This essay certainly does not intend to be so presumptuous as to suggest that Alcott's work should be placed only within this genre and, therefore, removed from all others. On the contrary. Few, if any, literary works conform to a single set of characteristics because generic definitions are themselves so fluid. As Sarah Robbins strongly cautions, critics who fail to recognize the "strategic choice" made by authors who "draw simultaneously upon a shifting repertoire of genres" lose the opportunity to discover the subtle authorial manipulations which enable a text to effectively work within a multiplicity of contexts (8).⁷ Recognizing Alcott's text as an early specimen of benevolence literature broadens the possibilities for a nuanced interpretation of *Hospital Sketches* and, possibly, her whole body of work. With this in mind, it is critical to thoroughly explore the ways in which benevolence literature distinguishes itself from other types of nineteenth-century writing.

It is true that the aforementioned literary cornerstones of the transcendental movement, particularly Emerson's essays, can be used to highlight a shift in emphasis away from *Self* and towards *Other*. For Bergman and Bernardi, benevolence literature shows writers to be questioning a problematic and limited "ethos of individualism and self-reliance" in favor of forging interpersonal connections that would allow the self to "balance selfish and selfless pursuits" (1). Rather than focusing solely on self-reliance and self-fulfillment, benevolence literature identifies charitable acts as a way to achieve self-actualization by helping others. Instead of forging identity by constructing a firm

⁷ Though focusing primarily on Sedgwick's benevolent literacy texts, Robbins's examination of benevolent motives and genre definitions is particularly relevant to the topic at hand.

distinction between “me” and “not-me,” benevolent projects encourage what Marianne Noble explains as “extending the ‘me’ to the ‘not-me’” (Noble qtd. in Bergman 195).

Alcott’s location on the bridge between the sentimental and benevolent is made evident by her inclusion of transcendental motivations which manage to ultimately result in benevolent actions. Though definitions of sentimental literature may vary depending on a critic’s ideological standpoint, for the purposes of this essay it can be understood as a literary genre that was extremely popular with women readers in the mid-nineteenth century. In *Woman’s Fiction*, Nina Baym describes sentimental literature as “profoundly oriented toward women” and observes that the novels typically relate a story of a young girl who must overcome hardships and struggle “with the necessity of winning her own way in the world” (11). Often, though not always, these novels conclude with marriage as the heroine’s reward for virtuous behavior. Because the novels’ plots typically revolve around a character whose experience evokes a sympathetic response from female readers, early critics of the genre “castigated this literature for [possessing] certain allegedly female qualities, [and] as the product of a timid, sentimental, narrow, [and] trivializing sensibility” (Baym 17). Even today some scholars view these texts as subversively feminist while others see them as reinforcing restrictive gender roles. However, just as Coe’s biography lauded Alcott for successfully transitioning from dependent child to metaphorical mother during the course of a lifetime, as an author Alcott deserves recognition for performing the same metamorphosis within the context of genre. By renegotiating the principles of sentimentalism through the terms provided by the philosophical writings of her father’s very famous literary friends, the daughter of transcendentalism is able to construct for herself and her readers a work of benevolence

literature which, in turn, creates an empowering space for those members of society who might not be so self-reliant.

When the colorfully-named narrator of Alcott's *Hospital Sketches*, Tribulation Periwinkle, leaves home and enlists as a military nurse her mission rings of Emersonian self-reliance with a benevolent twist. In fact, the collection begins with the very bold declaration, "*I want something to do*" (3). The language here is telling, Periwinkle's "want" suggests agency and desire, as well as a sense of lacking. Murmured by a boredom-plagued heroine, more likely to seek action in a drawing room than on a battlefield, this statement might appear whining; however, as professed by Periwinkle it becomes a vocalization of her desire for a life of activity rather than a life passively waiting for experience to seek her out. Periwinkle's wish, however, deviates from a purely Emersonian impulse. Though she wants something to do, Periwinkle also wants to do something for others. Rather than a rejection of Emerson, Alcott's variation on his theme both exemplifies and expands the call to action contained in "Self-Reliance." Emerson's declaration that "the power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried" supports the value in Periwinkle's thirst for activity (259). By setting forth of her own volition, in search of "something to do," the narrator initiates an active journey of self-discovery.

That a woman would take such an active role in the pursuit of her own enterprise is, perhaps, in and of itself an important way in which Alcott attempts to expand upon Emerson's project. Many readers have noted Emerson's exclusive reliance on masculine pronouns, not to mention his use of negatively gendered language. For example, Emerson describes "feminine rage" as belonging to the "the ignorant and poor..., the unintelligent

brute force that lies at the bottom of society” and as needing to be treated “as a trifle of no concernment” by the self-reliant man. To suggest that Emerson merely equates emotion with femininity is an understatement because, for him, “the rage of the cultivated classes” is at least “decorous and prudent” (265). The “cultivated classes,” which we can assume to be heavily populated by well-educated men, are allowed to experience emotions because their feelings are easily controlled and can be expressed within the well-defined boundaries of socially acceptable behavior. Feminine rage, or womanish anger, is another matter entirely. This gendered emotion, ascribed as belonging to “the ignorant and poor” is not merely emotional, but is also irrational, ignorant, and base—though Emerson’s claims it to be easily managed by the “firm man” who we can assume has both a firm hand to discipline and the ability to patronize and placate those he deems to be beneath him. The suggestion that feminized emotion can and must be easily managed by an outside influence also suggests the feminine to be incapable of self-management. While it’s difficult to go so far as to claim the gender-bias of Emerson’s language to be intentionally exclusive, particularly since women are invoked briefly at a later point in the essay, an examination of this diction does illuminate a lack within Emerson’s writing.⁸ Though women are not overtly barred from the transcendental conversation, neither are they explicitly or fully included. By crafting Periwinkle’s

⁸ The word “women” appears once in “Self-Reliance,” “woman” not at all. In the essay’s single moment of gender inclusion, Emerson writes: “We want men and women who shall renovate life and our social state, but we see that most natures are insolvent, cannot satisfy their own wants, have an ambition out of all proportion to their practical force, and do lean and beg day and night continually” (274-75). Thus, even in the lone moment of inviting women into the transcendental project; Emerson very carefully explains that few individuals are capable of participation while also demonstrating particular dislike for less fortunate members of society.

enlistment as a conscious choice both to pursue action and altruism, Alcott creates a context where the self-reliant and the feminine may coexist.

Periwinkle may be a product of Alcott's pen but the motivations of the character are not so disparate from the motivations of the author. Alcott's innate inclination towards action and adventure is demonstrated in a journal entry written during the month preceding her enlistment. In a journal entry dated "1862: September, October," she writes, "War news bad. Anxious faces, beating hearts, and busy minds. I like the stir in the air and long for battle like a warhorse when he smells powder. The blood of the Mays is up!" (109). In addition to noting Alcott's interest in both "beating hearts" and "busy minds," an almost unconscious pairing of the sentimental and the benevolent, the reader should observe that the author's allusion to instinctual physical response highlights Alcott's absolute inability to resist, and her thrill at the prospect of, making herself useful in a time of national crisis. At first glance it might seem that the aforementioned quotation draws on Alcott's transcendental upbringing and proves her to be a product of her environment: she is brought up to crave activity. It is also important to note that Alcott is invoking the blood of her abolitionist, anti-slavery forbears, whose values are certainly in keeping with the political context of her project. True, the absence of inertia does seem a very Emersonian trait given his argument that "no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil" (259). However, we must consider the position of the warhorse. An unlikely candidate for medals and accolades, the warhorse is still an essential element of battle because it supports and carries the men who wield weapons. Despite an inability to bear arms, the warhorse bears those who do fight and, in doing so, takes part in each great battle. True, the warhorse craves battle when his sensory memory

recalls the associations of gunpowder but Alcott's mention of blood suggests something beyond training, a desire for activity that is instinctual and which can be neither taught nor ignored. The emphasis on action also enables the author to counter perceptions of maternalism as a restful or passive state.

In addition to drawing attention to Periwinkle's thirst for action as instinctive and innate rather than trained or socially compelled, Alcott also places emphasis on her heroine's actively *seeking* a task to occupy her time, rather than passively *waiting* for the perfect project to appear as Brother Timon does in Alcott's short story, "Transcendental Wild Oats." Because of their desire for active participation and their inability to merely observe passively when labor is required for the benefit of others, both Alcott and Periwinkle bear a strong resemblance to the energetic Sister Hope of "Transcendental Wild Oats," a character based on Alcott's own mother. Sister Hope is a patient and insightful woman who, "with a humorous glimmer in her keen eyes," asks the idealistic transcendental philosopher Brother Timon, "What part of the work do you incline to yourself?" (368). Sister Hope is not surprised to find that the transcendental philosopher would rather talk than act and reflects on his past success following a philosophy that seemed to revolve around "being, not doing" (367). Given the unpleasantness and the unending quality of the household labor Sister Hope performs, all within the strictly limited guidelines set forth by the idealistic men, one might consider her work less a labor of desire and more a labor of necessity but, in truth, those two types of work often collide and combine for Alcott. Periwinkle's desire to work during wartime is both to occupy herself and help others. Similarly, Sister Hope's efforts are necessitated both by the impoverished circumstances in which her family is living and also by the desire to

keep herself busy while patiently waiting out her husband's latest lark. Given Alcott's view of men's unwillingness to work, or perhaps more accurately their willingness to allow others to work for them and in support of their misguided ideals, we should not be surprised at the realization that Alcott's "warhorse" blood, the blood which "is up!," is the blood of the Mays and is maternal in origin.

In his longer exploration of the Brook Farm experiment, The Blithedale Romance, Nathaniel Hawthorne also takes up the division of labor under transcendental ideals. Responding to an inquiry regarding whether or not tasks have been assigned, Zenobia lists the household chores which fall under the domain of "the softer sex"—baking, boiling, roasting, frying, stewing, washing, ironing, scrubbing, sweeping, and during "idler intervals" knitting and sewing (16). Miles Coverdale, Hawthorne's narrator, responds not by offering any assistance but only by observing that, "It is odd enough, that the kind of labor which falls to the lot of women is just that which chiefly distinguishes artificial life—the life of degenerated mortals—from the life of Paradise" (16). It is perhaps odder still, that rather than offering to help or assist in the work of "artificial life," Coverdale merely discounts women's labors as somehow less truthful than men's toiling and then proceeds to imagine Zenobia "in Eve's earliest garment" (17). Even if Zenobia, like Sister Hope, draws attention to the burden women bear when working within the parameters of transcendental "progress," her insight is undermined by Coverdale's reducing her to a sexualized body rather than allowing her to be a thoughtful, critical contributor to the project. At the end of Hawthorne's novel, Zenobia's reduction is rendered more complete when the men find her drowned body in the stream and, after pulling the rigor mortised form ashore, wrestle to position it in a more "decent" pose. The

potency of this image, men attempting to contort an independent woman into a more “proper” form, really mirrors what has taken place throughout the book’s entirety. Surely, Hawthorne goes farther than Emerson by at least including women in the transcendental project and drawing attention to the limited scope in which they are allowed to participate; however he does not go so far as to imagine a situation in which these limitations are lifted and female labor is liberated, valued, or even rewarded—either by external recognition or even by a women’s own sense of self-fulfillment. Though perhaps disappointing, it is not surprising that a narrative exploring the possibility of a woman actively pursue labor for her own reasons must issue forth from a woman’s pen and her own firsthand experience.

Alcott’s own motivation to enlist as a nurse was a complex mixture of a desire to do something that would occupy her own time while also providing assistance to the wounded soldiers. As if those two motives were not enough, in her journal the author expresses hopes that the effects of her benevolent actions will also be felt closer to home; the initial inklings of the benevolent transformation so clearly highlighted in Coe’s biography, Alcott’s shift from aided to aiding, is evidenced in a November 1862 journal entry which preceded the installment of the cozy new furnace by about nine years. The author echoes the fictional Periwinkle’s assertions that “help [is] needed” and that she “*must* let out [her] pent up energy in some new way.” Yet the decision to leave and seek action is not merely motivated by a desire for self-satisfaction. Alcott notes that by leaving she is helping those at war in addition to aiding her family by leaving them with “one less to feed and warm and worry over” (110). In admitting that her absence might be beneficial, Alcott recognizes the efforts of her own mother and seeks to alleviate the

burden at home while, in turn alleviating the burden away from home. Thus there is a benevolent motivation both for going and for leaving. Interestingly, we can also read the two-fold benefits to Alcott's enlistment as mirroring the duality of her writings by managing to bring about results suitable to both sentimental and benevolent genres. In the sentimental vein she brings about a positive change at home by embracing her filial responsibility and leaving her parents with fewer children for whom to care. From the perspective of benevolence, the impact of Alcott's actions is not limited solely the private sphere because the author also effects positive change in the public sphere by going and helping those outside her home who are in need of aid.

Perhaps appreciation of her mother's efforts at home heightened Alcott's sensitivity to the ways in which charitable actions were received and viewed by others. Once she is installed at the Washington medical institution in *Hospital Sketches*, "Hurly-burly House," the author's journal reveals self-consciousness regarding her own abilities and a modest awareness of the fact that her ministrations are received as graciously as they are offered. As Alcott confides in a January 1863 entry:

I like it—find real pleasure in comforting, tending & cheering these poor souls who seem to love me, to feel my sympathy though unspoken, & acknowledge my hearty good will in spite of the ignorance, awkwardness, & bashfulness which I cannot help showing in so new & trying a situation.

(113)

Because this passage appears in a journal rather than for public consumption, it was most likely not meant to be read by anyone beside the author and the resulting honesty and vulnerability which accompanies Alcott's admission is striking. In addition to feeling

empowered by her decision to leave home and take to nursing wounded soldiers, the author is quick to highlight the exchange and inversion facilitated by her interactions at the hospital. The circumstances of physical injury allow Alcott to offer assistance to men who gratefully accept, thus creating mutual benefit to both the caregiver and those for whom she is caring. Furthermore, because they have been wounded in battle, these ordinarily strong men have become reduced to objects of sympathy while Alcott, a novice nurse, has been elevated to the heightened status of beloved and capable woman who is able to provide meaningful aid despite her lack of experience.

The intangible emotional benefits of Alcott's work, "comforting, tending, & cheering," for example are most certainly important to and taken up within *Hospital Sketches*. During the scenes which occur at the bedside of the sick and wounded soldiers, the narrator takes great pains to emphasize the manner in which her femininity heightens her positive effect on the patients. On more than one occasion Periwinkle comforts men, not with medical treatment or religion, but with mere physical proximity. In caring for the "manliest man" in her ward, Periwinkle discovers that even a "strong man might long for the gentler tendance of a woman's hands, the sympathetic magnetism of a woman's presence" (41, 40). As efforts are made to preserve the masculine appearance of Periwinkle's patient, John, by consistently referring to his possessing strength despite his being bedridden, Alcott is able to present a multi-dimensional, and multi-directional, relationship between both nurse and soldier. John's willingness and ability to suffer without complaint allows him to indirectly claim a fraction of Emerson's self-reliance despite his inevitable death. John is esteemed by fellow enlisted men for "his patience, respected for his piety, [and] admired for his fortitude;" John is not an object of pity so

much as an object of sympathy (44). That such a strong figure, one for whom Alcott has clearly taken great pains to preserve the appearance of his masculinity, should endure such pain and take comfort from the presence of a woman may be seen as clearly counteracting Emerson's arguments about charity's capacity to diminish man. Because he suffers through his illness not passively but by actively determining his reactions to the pain John manages to retain his intellectual autonomy despite his diminished physical capacity for action. The distinction is important to reading Alcott's work as existing on the border between the sentimental and benevolent.

In many ways, the historical context of the Civil War served to facilitate this generic shift. The other famous author who nursed Civil War soldiers, Walt Whitman, was profoundly affected by the wounded bodies he encountered in the hospital and the metaphorical wounding he identified as having affected the nation's spirit. Claiming that the dead were to be pitied less than the survivors who would "never recuperate," Whitman acknowledged that health was not necessarily a matter of choice and disabled men deserved access to kind treatment. In his tending of Union soldiers "for benevolent purposes," Whitman faced the same challenges as Alcott (Scholnick 258).⁹ How does one comfort a dying man whose only regret is that he wasn't injured in the chest because "it looks cowardly to be hit in the back"? By interacting *with* John rather than acting *towards* him Periwinkle avoids privileging the injury over her patient's humanity. As a result, Alcott's heroine proves herself worthy of the reader's admiration while, simultaneously,

⁹ Many of the provocative essays in this collection, *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities* (2002), edited by Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, provide a helpful vocabulary and framework for examining disability studies as a means of empowering rather than objectifying individuals with disabilities.

challenging and complicating Emerson's infamous opposition to charitable acts by showing that recipients of charity need not trade their humanity for aid.

Despising indebtedness of any sort, to any one, Emerson railed against philanthropic actions which were inspired by a sense of obligation. Emerson spends a great deal of time in "Self-Reliance" warning the "foolish philanthropist" not to speak of any "obligation to put all poor men in good situations." The philosopher goes on to declare:

I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong. . . . —though I confess with shame I sometimes succumb and give the dollar, it is a wicked dollar, which by and by I shall have the manhood to withhold. (262)

Emerson views the reciprocation or initiation of obligation as a weakness; for Alcott it is empowering. Monika Elbert identifies Emerson's attitude as rooted in his disdain for the power structure which is insinuated in charity. For Elbert, Emerson dislikes the philanthropist for claiming the authority to bestow anything upon anyone and cannot bear the indignity of indebtedness (163). By constructing a character such as John, a hyper-masculine invalid who is simultaneously weak and strong, Alcott counters Emerson's argument that charity must reduce both the giver and the recipient. The benevolent exchanges which take place at John's bedside serve to benefit both Periwinkle and her patient. Rather than being reduced by their interactions, John and Periwinkle find comfort in each other's company.

Through the process of demonstrating the merits of female benevolence, Alcott is also carving out a place both within and against the Emersonian valuation of activity over emotion. In “Self-Reliance,” Emerson argues that regret and sympathy are “base.” Rather than taking the time to “weep foolishly and sit down and cry” in the company of those who suffer “calamity,” Emerson rather harshly argues that one should be “imparting to them truth and health in rough electric shocks” (276). Alcott’s writing draws attention to the fact that, within the context of a military hospital, doling out reality checks seems not only inappropriate but it would serve no real purpose. What rough truth should be imparted to a man wounded in combat? That he should never have strayed from the safer confines of his own farm? Yet, Emerson would also negatively view the man who did not act. Thus it again becomes clear that Emersonian self-reliance can be contradictory and isn’t universally applicable. Instead, Alcott shows her reader that the ability to empathize is of value. Through these stories the limitations of Emerson’s philosophies are dragged out into the light and exposed as exclusive and idealistic. However, rather than simply turning self-reliance out into the street, Alcott is able to manipulate Emerson’s theories and expand them to be more inclusive.

Periwinkle is admirable and benevolent but she is not saintly. Even as Alcott expands what it means to be self-reliant, the nurse’s interactions with “the reb” show her to equal Emerson in susceptibility to personal bias (25). According to David Reynolds, Emerson harbored “a deep hatred for proper ‘goodies’” as can be seen in the philosopher’s argument that one’s “goodness must have some edge to it,—else it is none” (262). Goodness “with an edge” lends itself to describing a type of benevolence which is enthusiastic but not unbounded. For Emerson, charitable actions which recognize

personal limitations and do not, to build on Reynolds's term, belong to the all-inclusive sphere of the goody-goody, have at least some merit. The rebel soldier who is brought to Periwinkle's ward serves to highlight the limits of her own benevolence. Described by another man as a "red-headed devil ... damn him!" the Confederate soldier rubs the nurse in all the wrong ways, both politically and by insisting on maintaining a gruff independence. Given the inclusive benevolence of Alcott's narrative prior to this moment, the reader might expect Periwinkle to ignore the Union soldier's insistence that she "[not] wash him, nor feed him, but jest let [the reb] holler till he's tired." However, for a "red-hot Abolitionist" as Periwinkle describes herself, it would seem that political views have the ability to override maternal or moral obligation. After privately resolving to "put soap in his eyes, rub his nose the wrong way, and excoriate his cuticle generally," Periwinkle's "amiable intentions" are thwarted by the reb's decision to bathe himself (25). It is important, however, to also note that the Confederate soldier insists on maintaining his own independence despite having sustained physical injuries. In contrast to John's gratitude for the assistance offered by Periwinkle, the Confederate's refusal to be aided also shows his alignment with the older, Emersonian view of asserting one's self-reliance at all costs and in all circumstances. The tension between benevolence and self-reliance is further highlighted by the fact that Alcott's heroine is able to *refuse* benevolence when the circumstances would require her to sacrifice her own moral and ethical code serves to further reinforce the belief that she acts from a position of empowerment rather than indebtedness. Paradoxical as it may sound, Periwinkle's "edge" demonstrates the sincerity of her endeavor. The ability to choose whether or not she helps

the soldiers not only reasserts the nurse's agency in the project but also increases the value of the benevolence Periwinkle chooses to bestow.

Not only is the possibility of selective benevolence key to Periwinkle's project, so is the female narrator and author's ability to claim the story as her own. In the case of John, not only does the nurse physically outlive the patient but Alcott's account of the incident endures while the soldier does not. In fact, John dies just a few moments before the story he has written with his own pen, a letter to his family, is delivered. Thus the female author is able to narrate the experience while the male author is unable to share his version of events. As for the intended mistreatment of the Reb, this scene demonstrates Alcott asserting her right as author to affirm the truth value of her text by recounting a story that does not necessarily paint the heroine in the most flattering light. The inclusion of an unflattering story, a scene that illustrates the limitations of Periwinkle's capacity for benevolence, again contributes to the reader's sense that when healing gestures are extended they are in fact thoughtful and sincere rather than rote and mechanical. However, one cannot ignore the fact that opportunities to exhibit this healing femininity are made possible by some of the most intimate physical interactions one can have with a stranger's body.

Emphasis on the physical body as a site for comfort and comforting is central to critical readings of other benevolence literature.¹⁰ The privileging of physicality over emotion and sympathy is a way *Hospital Sketches* can be seen as drifting away from the

¹⁰ Previously in this chapter, *The Blithedale Romance* was criticized for the way Zenobia was reduced to a physical body rather than engaged as an active intellect. It is important to note that physical bodies are treated differently in this context; rather than Periwinkle viewing the wounded body as a site for pity and means of exerting her own superiority, bodies are viewed as a site for benevolence that need not shift the power balance too dramatically in the able-bodied nurse's favor.

sentimental genre and towards the developing benevolence genre. According to Jane Tompkins, the sentimental genre located the “human heart” as the “important arena for action” (qtd. in Bergman 194). Conversely, in her examination of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Gates Ajar*, a noted work of benevolence literature published five years after *Hospital Sketches*, Jill Bergman recounts a moving anecdote in which Phelps dismisses a neighbor’s assertions that comfort is to be found in God and, instead, consoles the newly-informed widow of a bar-fight loser by simply holding the woman and letting her cry. Acknowledging the needs of the physical body prior to focusing one’s efforts on healing the intellectual or spiritual self occurs repeatedly within the text of Alcott’s collection. During Periwinkle’s first shift as a nurse she cleans and feeds the men supper, remarking only afterwards that “having got the bodies of my boys into something like order, the next task was to minister to their minds” (29). Before any effort can be made to affect the patients intellectually or emotionally, the nurse must acknowledge that they are in need of physical care. Admittedly, the fact that the narrative takes place in a hospital certainly facilitates an emphasis on bodies. After all, these men are in the Hurly-burly House because their bodies are broken and in need of tending. “Maternal benefactresses [can] attain a kind of transcendent embodiment radiating virtue, agency, and invulnerability,” but injured bodies lie in direct opposition to earlier-nineteenth century emphasis on liberal individualism because they are “mired in bodily subjugation, despair, and impotence” (Thomson 557). Just as Alcott reinforces Emersonian ideology with her initial desire to *do* and *experience* something, she also challenges the accessibility of transcendentalism for those who are not physically sound. By highlighting the exclusivity of transcendental beliefs, Alcott is also able to rebuke

Bronson Alcott's ideology of the perfect physical self as an emblem of the perfect moral self. Certainly one expects to see wounded men in a hospital; however, the Hurly-burly House also serves as a type of liminal space for Alcott. By drawing attention to her benevolent role, she subtly suggests that during a time of war and confusion the idealistic philosophies of the transcendentalists may be exclusive and elusive.¹¹

The potential inclusivity facilitated by Alcott's depiction of her tenure in the hospital is evidenced more clearly in the short story, "My Contraband." Excluded from the original edition of *Hospital Sketches*, the story of a fugitive slave who befriends a nurse was quietly smuggled into the 1871 second edition. The expanded collection, *Hospital Sketches and Camp and Fireside Stories* begins with an introduction where Alcott adeptly woos her readers. Managing to portray herself as both humble by acknowledging that her sketches "make no pretension to literary merit" and simultaneously an authoritative recorder "of one person's hospital experience," Alcott appears unpretentious yet trustworthy ("Preface" i). The author's accessibility to readers allows them to begin the collection with the belief that the author is extending herself to them by sharing her experiences, rather than setting herself apart from or above them by asserting her superiority and expertise. Even this exchange invokes benevolent maternalism by illustrating the relationship that might be extended from a female author to her reader.

"My Contraband" is an important foil to the primary text of *Hospital Sketches*. Just as "the Reb" demonstrated the limitations of Periwinkle's benevolence, so does this

¹¹ Laffrado's essay, mentioned above, does an excellent job of examining how gender roles are challenged within *Hospital Sketches*. Elizabeth Young's *Disarming the Nation*, takes up this conversation as well.

story demonstrate the limitations of benevolence as a literary genre. Perhaps in anticipation of readers' hesitation towards the subject matter of "My Contraband," Alcott slips back into the more reassuringly familiar patterns of sentimentality so as to aid this narrating nurse, Miss Dane, in the retention of readers' sympathy. Rather than emphasizing Miss Dane's initiative and desire for activity, here Alcott highlights the nurse's almost saintly capacity for pity and forgiveness. The title of the story refers to a newly-freed slave who is being treated at a Union hospital. As the narrative unfolds we find that Robert, the "contraband," intends to murder a fellow-patient. Ned, the prospective victim of Robert's plot, happens to also be Robert's former master and his half-brother. As if those connections weren't enough to complicate the men's relationship to each other, the reader comes to understand that Ned is also responsible for the death of Robert's wife, Lucy, who had taken her own life after being raped by Ned. While *Hospital Sketches* presented John, the wounded soldier, as an example of strength despite infirmity, "My Contraband" works diligently to convince the reader of Robert's humanity despite his race and the violence of his intentions. The result is that the careful equilibrium maintained between John and Periwinkle does not exist between Robert and Miss Dane. Instead, their relationship is undeniably hierarchical, and rather than sympathizing with Robert, the reader is encouraged to pity him. In fact, Nurse Dane's first appraisal of Robert concludes that he possessed "an eye full of the passionate melancholy which in such men always seems to utter a mute protest against the broken law that doomed them at their birth" (76). By romanticizing Robert's situation and transforming him from ordinary man to tragic figure, Nurse Dane immediately establishes herself as fully in control of constructing the manner in which the ex-slave is

perceived. While we saw a similar privileging of the female narrator's voice, or pen, during Periwinkle's exchanges with John, her perception of that soldier was not so starry-eyed as to completely place him in the category of "other."

Clearly, from the first page of "My Contraband" it is made apparent that Miss Dane will not be mistaken by any reader for Periwinkle's double. Though her abolitionist beliefs interfere with her ability to love the Rebel soldiers, Nurse Dane is more than "willing to take care of them"—at first glance it would seem that she possesses goodness without the edge (75). However, as the story unfolds and she finds herself facing the vengeance-mad Robert, Nurse Dane invokes all manner of sentimental language as a means of intervening. Though her voice fails her as she attempts to reason with Robert and pull him from the haze of revenge, Nurse Dane's emotions serve her very well. Indeed it is unspoken communication, "the frightened flutter" of her heart, which allows Nurse Dane to change Robert's mind (83). Despite the sentimental language invoked in this scene, Nurse Dane demonstrates resourcefulness and rhetorical awareness beyond what a reader might expect. The nurse's willingness to engage an emotional appeal in order to reach her audience certainly mirrors the author's inclination towards generic flexibility in order to reach hers.

However, that she worries profusely not over the state of Robert's body, or even his mind, but over the state of his soul is telling. Not only is Nurse Dane in a position to dispense charity, she has laid claim to the utmost authority associated with salvation. Successful in her appeals, the nurse claims that Heaven intervened as "words burned on [her] lips, tears streamed from [her] eyes, and some good angel prompted [her] to use the one name that had power to arrest [her] hearer's hand and touch his heart." Thus the

attempted murder is thwarted by Nurse Dane's invocation of Lucy, a name which resonated upon the tender strings of Robert's broken heart and "softened the man's iron will until a woman's hand could bend it" (86-87). The difference in Nurse Dane's relationship to Robert and Periwinkle's relationship to John demonstrates clearly how matters of race complicate the dynamic of benevolence literature. Though readers might have been able to accept a nurse's benevolence towards a white man, their prejudices reaffirm the hierarchical race relations often seen in sentimental literature. One might be tempted to compare race with other physical disabilities that impair an individual's ability to assert their self-reliance. Though Alcott is clearly sympathetic to Robert's plight, she is also well aware of her readers' prejudice. By the story's end, when Nurse Dane encounters Robert yet again, this time as he is lying in a hospital bed, dying from battle injuries sustained as a Union soldier, she discovers that he has assumed her surname. Though Robert has chosen to amend his name, the gesture touches the nurse and she sees it as evidence of their mutual affect upon each other. While one certainly hates to be cynical or diminish Robert's gesture in any way, the assumption of the nurse's name might also be read as evidence of the indebtedness Emerson so loathed. Ultimately, the ambiguity of this moment allows Alcott's readers to draw their own conclusions based upon their own political views and the degree to which they would have willingly accepted equality between "a contraband" and a white woman.

One might be tempted to view Alcott's employment of sentimentalism to tell "My Contraband" as evidence of benevolence literature's failings and question whether or not this choice suggests that any content which might challenge a reader requires the softer touch of sentimentality. While it might be true that feminizing Nurse Dane's response to

Robert could make it more palatable to readers—after all, even the harshest critic of abolition might accept the suggestion that a woman’s capacity for pity is boundless—we should be cognizant of the fact that this choice was deliberately made by Alcott. Rather than merely an example of one genre’s strength in any particular moment, this decision must be read as indicative of Alcott’s generic fluency. Alcott’s ability to select the genre which best suits the needs of her narrative, and her reader, demonstrates her mastery as an author. Not only is Alcott physically ambidextrous, but so is she generically flexible.

Alcott’s sensitivity to the needs of her readers sheds light upon a most intriguing side-effect of benevolence literature; the author herself can assume a maternalistic position in respect to her writing and, through that writing, her reader. Though Alcott’s stories were written in 1863, the perception of women writers as metaphorically giving birth to their texts had entered the literary conversation a decade prior. The relationship of the author as mother to her own written work was of central importance to the literary perspective of *The Una: A Paper Devoted to the Elevation of Woman*, published from 1853 to 1855.¹² According to Phyllis Cole, Paulina Wright Davis encouraged *Una* readers to become writers and, in the process, resist the urge to “banish their lame progeny to the deep” (82). The metaphorical likening of women’s writing to crippled children is striking, particularly when viewed in light of Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s claim that middle-class women in the nineteenth century were not capable of seeking status on their own

¹² Though *The Una* was no longer being produced when Alcott became a nurse, her *Flower Fables* were positively reviewed prior to the paper’s demise. *Flower Fables* was Alcott’s “adolescent debut” which only heightens the likelihood she would have been, if not affected by, then at the very least aware of the *Una*’s feminist political pro-literary ideology. Though it does not necessarily bear on the argument at hand, it is interesting to note that *Flower Fables* was dedicated to Ellen Emerson, thus serving as further evidence of Alcott’s relationship to the transcendentalist circle and the degree to which her writing may be seen as responding to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s philosophies.

behalf but the act of rescuing or aiding a disabled body could “authorize the benevolent woman’s move from the confining home to the public realm” (564). By rhetorically linking a feminized project—benevolence—with the act of writing, the *Una* attempted to subvert arguments against women’s voices while also imagining a place for them in Emerson’s philosophy. Rather than emphasizing the description of women’s writing as “lame progeny” as a means of discounting women’s ability to produce valuable and important texts, Davis’s urging should be seen as a means of encouraging her peers despite the limitations they might face if dealing with male criteria for what is “good” or “worthwhile.”¹³

To a degree, the maternal relationship between author and reader may be seen as the author’s attempt to cater to the reader in exchange for status outside of the domestic sphere. However, rather than described as consciously calculating, benevolent authors are more typically characterized as women who seek to comfort their readership and console them. In her essay, Bergman explains that writing can be constructed as an “avenue for benevolence—both as a way of comforting the suffering reader and of offering instruction in benevolent behavior” (Bergman, “‘Oh the Poor Women!’” 191). This is certainly the case with Alcott. In a letter written on Nov. 6th, 1863 to her friend, Mary Elizabeth Waterman, Alcott seems surprised at the impact of her sketches, wondering “why people like a few extracts from topsey turvey letters” and surmising that it is because “people are very kind and easily pleased.” The author even goes so far as to claim that she “do[esn’t] understand it at all & probably never shall” (*Selected Letters*

¹³ Confronting negative attitudes towards women’s writing also brings to mind Hawthorne’s dismissive description of “scribbling women.” The point is not evaluating women’s writing as to its capacity for pleasing others, but in encouraging women to write regardless of how men, or even women themselves, might initially appraise these efforts.

95). Alcott continues on in the letter to express a willingness to recount her hospital experiences, should her readers find them pleasing, and confesses that she never grows tired of thinking about the soldiers for whom she cared—especially since several of them continue to correspond with her. Alcott’s surprise over the success of *Hospital Sketches* may be, to a degree, merely polite modesty but there is nothing to suggest her adoration of the soldiers whom she tended is anything but sincere, particularly since she affectionately refers to the men as “my boys” and these comments appear in a private letter (95). In addition to expressing a willingness to write about her experience, Alcott describes the how those “topsey turvey letters” were written “on inverted tin kettles, in [her] pantry, while waiting for gruel to warm or poultices to cool, for boys to wake and be tormented, on stairs, in window seats & other sequestered spots favorable to literary inspiration” (95). This description of Alcott’s composition process highlights the degree to which writing benevolent literature and one’s own benevolent actions are compatible. For Alcott’s text to be drafted in the brief moments between caring for wounded men shows that the author is aware and keen on demonstrating that her own intellectual pursuits need not exclude the opportunity to extend aid towards another. Furthermore, by describing the soldiers in a motherly manner, while also describing the writing process as something she’s glad to do if it brings joy to another; Alcott reveals both the benevolent maternalism of the context and content of her writing.

Though Alcott is candid in the exchange with her friend, recognition of the need to censor private observations prior to publication can be seen in the author’s treatment of Dorothea Dix. In a private, January 1863, journal entry Alcott notes that Dix is “a kind soul but very queer and arbitrary” (116). According to a footnote in *The Journals of*

Louisa May Alcott, the author originally wrote “no one likes her and I don’t wonder” and then crossed out the aside (123, n7). Despite having already decided to soften the negative appraisal of Dix in her journal, Alcott goes one step further towards creating a positive description of the woman in the published account. The “D.D.” of *Hospital Sketches* is “thoughtfully tender as any mother”—no small compliment in the genre of benevolence literature (55). By acknowledging that observations must be carefully portrayed to a wide readership, so as to serve the work’s greater goal of celebrating and encouraging benevolence, the author makes clear how strategically she approaches the task of producing a text with a clear and cohesive message. Had she allowed herself to openly criticize another woman in her position, the importance of benevolence as a larger project might have been overshadowed by what appeared to be petty disagreement. This decision also shows Alcott demonstrating benevolence of her own towards Dorothea Dix who, having been at Hurly-Burly House with Periwinkle’s real-life counterpart, would likely have read *Hospital Sketches* and been hurt by a negative assessment of her own character.

That a study of benevolence occurs not just within the text, but within the public perception of the author is clearly demonstrated within the contemporary reviews of Alcott’s collection. An anonymous reviewer for the *Springfield Daily Republican* reports that purchasing a copy of *Hospital Sketches* will “prove both a duty and a pleasure” because the “purchaser’s money not only defrays the cost of publication but helps the homeless orphans of the war, and is a substantial token of respect to a faithful army nurse...” (13). The anonymous author of this review is celebrating Alcott for her benevolent service in the military but, in highlighting Alcott’s intention to donate a

portion of the proceeds, drawing attention to the fact that the author has created a benevolent opportunity for her readers. It seems only fitting that the charity of choice for a text on the cusp of benevolent maternalism should be homeless, motherless children. Additionally, this reviewer indirectly draws attention to the fact that benevolence is not merely unidirectional but can create a type of circuit where one individual's actions create more opportunities for others to also engage in this enterprise of helping.

Rather than highlighting the charitable aspect of purchasing Alcott's book, as done by the *Springfield Daily Republican*, the *Boston Cultivator* focused its review more closely on the manner in which the author's femininity heightened her ability to recount her experiences. According to that review, *Hospital Sketches* contains "a quiet undertone that touches the finest chords of pathos in our nature" and evidence that Alcott was in possession of "a true heart" (10). However, even more interesting than the mention of how Alcott's gender affects her relationship to the sketches' subject matter is the manner in which the *Cultivator* engages Alcott's gender as it pertains to her skill as a writer. The anonymous reviewer writes:

With all the grace, facility, and directness of woman she writes a quantity of humor and strength of phrasing which delights all readers; and while her enlivening wit sparkles in almost every sentence, there is also a quiet undertone... But the heartrending facts, in finding expression through this noble woman, do not hide or destroy her natural genius for the bright and reenlightening lights of life, and in this little volume again we see how a true heart may ever have room for both pity and a cheerful and cheering hope. (10)

The recognition that Alcott creates space for both pity and hope by engaging her wit and genius certainly suggests the reviewer's awareness, even if not consciousness, of the author's text as working in a multiplicity of ways. One of the longest contemporary reviews of *Hospital Sketches*, this brief summary of the text encourages readers to note how Alcott's gender affects her writing's ability to affect the reader by utilizing both intellectual and emotional appeals. Furthermore, there is an additional benefit to Alcott's tending so carefully to both aspects of concern to her readers: not only does Alcott's book construct an opportunity for the reader to participate in her benevolent project, but it also cares for the minds of its readers while also containing the degree of comfort which Bergman identified as facilitating maternalism between the author and reader.

Admittedly there are risks associated with perpetuating benevolent maternalism in literature. Just as the middle-class woman saw benevolent acts as a means of potentially elevating and securing status for herself, so was she able to indirectly reinforce the inferiority of the literally or metaphorically wounded. While benevolence literature allows healthy middle-class women to assume a role of importance outside of the domestic enclosure, one might argue that it does so at the expense of lower class women, minorities, and the physically disabled. When Periwinkle becomes sick at the hospital she has the option of going home; the men do not. Though the possible opportunism of mining wounded bodies and less fortunate members of society for literary material should be acknowledged, no genre can really be thought to be without flaws or potential faults if viewed from all angles. Furthermore, the potential criticisms of benevolence literature as a genre need not affect the larger argument at hand. Alcott's active engagement with both benevolent maternalism and sentimentalism show her to be a thoughtful craftswoman

who consciously makes choices that she judges to be in the best interest of her subject and her readers. Whether or not a reader judges Alcott's choices to be appropriate by contemporary standards should not weigh upon our evaluation of her as an author who very deliberately controls her texts.

In addition to considering potential criticism of benevolence literature as secondary to any evaluation of Alcott's merit as an author, it is worth noting that Alcott herself is not without self-awareness. The illness that plagued Alcott following her enlistment serves both to provide a frame of reference regarding illness and to encourage the author to also view her position in relation to the wounded men very clearly. While serving as a nurse, the author had contracted typhoid fever which, in turn, led to her departure from the hospital. Upon recovering from "3 weeks of delirium," Alcott recounts the experience in her journal:

Found a queer, thin, big-eyed face when I looked in the glass, didn't know myself at all, & when I tried to walk discovered that I couldn't, & cried because "my legs wouldn't go." Never having been sick before it was all new & very interesting...

Had all my hair 1 ½ yard long cut off & went into caps like a grandma. Felt badly about losing my one beauty. Never mind, it might have been my head & a wig outside is better than a loss of wits inside. (1863: February, *Journals* 117)

This journal entry clearly shows Alcott to be working to comprehend sickness and its effects, both physical and psychological, upon the infected sufferer. The admission that she's never been sick prior to this illness suggests that, however horrible her disease, the

experience was a timely one which would allow her the perspective required to construct an empathetic and fair portrayal of the wounded men about whom she would write in *Hospital Sketches*. Furthermore, the bout of typhoid fever places Alcott in a position to even-handedly measure her own experience with sickness and the advantages she possesses that were not available to her patients. Despite the small vanity of being disappointed to lose her hair, the acknowledgement that “it might have been my head” shows the author to be fully aware of her privileged position, especially when compared to those around her who have lost their limbs or lives and to whom the mere loss of a “beauty” would have been considered little more than a minor inconvenience. Even within the framework of her own benevolent project, Alcott is quick to identify the greater suffering and sacrifice of those around her. Had she done any less Alcott might have become an object of pity or an example of self-pity rather than epitomizing benevolence for her readership. If benevolence literature requires the ability to extend oneself towards others and consider their physical needs and their intellectual perspective, then clearly Alcott’s own behavior in this moment mirrors her literary project—a phenomenon we’ve seen quite regularly throughout this examination of these works.

Admittedly, comingling the evaluation of an author’s work and life can, at times, be problematic and cause the reader to underestimate the fact that a creative product can emerge from the imagination and need not necessarily reflect upon the author as autobiographical information. However, given that Alcott’s sketches are directly drawn from her own experiences and in correspondence she goes so far as to refer to herself as “T. Periwinkle,” to ignore the autobiographical element of these stories would limit our

ability to fully understand Alcott's project (*Letters* 95). By understanding the very personal element of this text we are able to bring forth elements of Alcott's upbringing—namely her firsthand experience of transcendentalism's limits and limitations—and her later experiences that shaped the ways in which she chose to craft her texts. While the introduction to this chapter examined Alcott's ambidexterity as a metaphor for the duality of her texts, so can her life experiences and her performance in a variety of roles—including sister, daughter, author, and nurse—be seen as representative of the multiple audiences she had in mind when constructing these sketches.

The ability to recognize a reader's need to be emotionally comforted and reassured during a time of national upheaval and uncertainty certainly led to Alcott's decision to utilize the familiar tropes of sentimentalism. Furthermore, the employment of that genre, especially in "My Contraband," allowed Alcott to present potentially controversial material in a manner that would not alienate a reader who might not so adamantly share her abolitionist views. Yet, in portraying Tribulation Periwinkle's actions as more benevolent than sentimental, Alcott's text also models an ideal of activity for women and others who might have been excluded from transcendental or American ideals of self-sufficiency. Rather than creating an idealized woman who is always angelic in her touch and her thoughts, Alcott paints a picture of a very down-to-earth young woman who recognizes the need of practicality and action, both for her own fulfillment and for the benefit of her family and country.

Slim though the volume might be, Coe's biography for children makes some very important observations about Louisa May Alcott's legacy as a writer. Never intentionally engaging in analysis of her literary technique, Coe's biography instead indirectly

provides an important reminder about the lasting impact of authorial choices on the readership. Given the significance of maternalism to benevolence literature it seems only fitting that an author's ability to affect the lives of young readers—who are also common figures in sentimental literature and perhaps those members of society least able to claim agency or self-reliance—should figure so prominently in our final appraisal of Alcott's effective manipulation of genre in *Hospital Sketches*. By emphasizing the affection young fans have for the author, as well as the degree to which she might be a role model, not just for aspiring authors but for young people everywhere, Coe's text reminds us that the choices Alcott made in her writing were effective beyond merely the immediate reception of her narratives. Alcott left a legacy which still tends to the comfort of her readers and allows her to make not just the hospital, but the text, a home.

CHAPTER TWO

“Beyond the circle of mere pity”: Reforming Benevolence in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Silent Partner*

“If following your fancy (provided it be a worthy fancy) imply leaving your home,
and you can conscientiously leave your home, I hope that you will do it, girls,
and that you will take your mother’s blessing with you.”
—Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, “Why Will They Do It?”

Much like her contemporary Louisa May Alcott, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps had the extreme good fortune of being a popular writer during her lifetime.¹⁴ Phelps’s first novel, *The Gates Ajar* (1868), was so immensely popular that the only book to outsell it in the nineteenth century was Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) (Smith vi). Phelps’s early success, like Alcott’s, was largely seated in the public’s response to an antebellum publication which brought comfort to many of its grieving readers. While Alcott’s *Hospital Sketches* (1863) borrowed liberally from the author’s own experience serving as a nurse during the Civil War, *The Gates Ajar*¹⁵ was not a firsthand account, but it did draw largely on the author’s reflections of the grieving she witnessed. Though Alcott’s collection stands as an excellent example of benevolence literature, meant to serve as an example of how a woman might set aside her own concerns in the interest of actively helping others, *The Gates Ajar* is a far more classically sentimental text that sought to bring comfort to a grieving nation which had lost more than half a

¹⁴ Some critics of Phelps’s work refer to her as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps [Ward] since she did eventually marry; however, since she published *The Silent Partner* only as Phelps and that is how she is most commonly known, that is the name which will be used in this essay.

¹⁵ Though these works were published several years apart, they are actually contemporary to each other. Phelps wrote *The Gates Ajar* from 1864-1865, only shortly after Alcott’s collection was published. Phelps’s manuscript then languished with a publisher for two years before actually appearing in spring.

million fathers, sons, brothers, and husbands. However, by setting forth a domestic version of heaven in which women could be reconciled with lost loved ones, Phelps's text bears a similarity to Alcott's because it actively revises a tradition to carve out a niche in which women's needs and concerns are more clearly taken into account.

Though Phelps's writings are largely categorized as sentimental, often due to their emotional appeals, use of religious rhetoric as a means of striking readers' consciences, and emphasis on vulnerable women and children, this classification is limited and limiting. It is undeniable that much of Phelps's fiction draws on sentimental tropes to reach her readers but these texts also demonstrate many of the characteristics so often associated with benevolent maternalism—an emphasis on tending to the body and upper-class white women in positions of bestowing charity on the broken, damaged, or otherwise handicapped bodies of the lower class. Understanding benevolent maternalism as positioned between sentimentalism and benevolence literature allows us to understand how it draws from each genre without embracing the full implications of either. However, these generic associations do not capture or encapsulate the entirety of Phelps's project. In addition to these genres, the author also attempts—especially as will be seen in this examination of *The Silent Partner*—to construct a reformist literature that speaks and motivates readers to effect change on not just the small, personal scale, but on the larger institutional level. The result of this generic hybridity is that Phelps challenges the terms of all three genres and effectively reaches her reader by both meeting and defying preexisting expectations. Rather than merely presenting a single-minded novel of change, *The Silent Partner* wrestles with both form and meaning to a degree which ultimately mirrors the potential messiness of any reform movement.

Phelps's interest in improving women's place in society, however, hardly begins and ends with a desire to comfort grieving mothers and widows. In her introduction to *Three Spiritualist Novels*, a collection that included *The Gates Ajar* and its two subsequent sequels, Nina Baym presents Phelps as belonging to a sorority of female writers "nostalgic for antebellum ideals of Christian domesticity and homogeneous community life . . . [who] struggled to situate women like themselves—white, Anglo, genteel, idealistic, socially conscious—in a world constantly outrunning their efforts to grasp it" (vii).¹⁶ While Baym's description of these authors is largely correct, her description of their nostalgia as facilitating a struggle they were not necessarily winning—the image of the world "outrunning their efforts" certainly paints an image of these women as outdated in their thinking and unable to keep up with or even ahead of social progress—is puzzling. While Phelps and her contemporaries may not have wholly eschewed social convention, presenting female protagonists who adhere to acceptable nineteenth-century perceptions of beauty and conduct, their texts do contain an element of transgression and revision. If, in fact, the world was constantly one step ahead of this generation of writers then it is only because time is constantly one step ahead of us all. In her thinking and writing, despite the influence of more traditional depictions of femininity, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps was constantly imagining and exploring what womanhood could look like or become as time so rapidly progressed. *The Silent Partner* (1871) shows Phelps to be wrestling not just with how to comfort women or reconciling nostalgia with progress, but as questioning their role in society and their ability to

¹⁶ This grouping also includes Mary E. W. Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett, Louisa May Alcott, Rose Terry Cooke, Celia Thaxter, Rebecca Harding Davis, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. My critique of Baym's assessment as it applies to Phelps would apply to these other authors as well.

actively influence both the domestic and public sphere through active involvement with evolving economic structures.

Furthermore, though Phelps may not have drawn on personal experience in the creation of *The Gates Ajar*, her short story “The Tenth of January” and *The Silent Partner* both draw upon the author’s observations of life in Massachusetts. In her autobiography, *Chapters from a Life* (1895), Phelps describes the tragic night that the Pemberton Mills sank to the ground due to faulty construction. Prior to that moment, mill workers had been merely “a dark and restless, but a patient throng” that passed by the restaurant where Phelps and her family ate ice cream (88). On the evening of the catastrophe, however, the author and her happily oblivious family, who amused themselves by counting the structures as they drove, “were forced to think about the mills with curdling horror” as the building and machinery collapsed with seven hundred and fifty men and women (89). During the rescue attempts an overturned lantern set fire to the mills, burning those who were trapped inside. Phelps recalls hearing rumors that the mill girls, realizing there was no hope of escape, began to sing. Though she was barred from going, the author’s brother “being of the privileged sex” was allowed to view the scene (91). Despite having been kept from surveying the tragedy with her own eyes, the incident certainly caught Phelps’s imagination and inspired her to write a short story. While “The Tenth of January” is a direct recounting of the Pemberton Mills tragedy, the cause of mill workers took root and is explored in much greater detail by *The Silent Partner*. The major catastrophe in the novel—small catastrophes, such as workplace accidents and work-related illness, are fairly regular occurrences in Five Falls—involves water, not fire, but the impact of the Pemberton tragedy is clearly fictionalized. However, in her biography Phelps described

the mill girls as singing, not “music for music’s sake” but common hymns, “the plain, religious outcries of the people” (90). It is interesting to note that this seems to be the only time the Phelps family hears or attends to the workers’ voices. This moment most likely helped Phelps to realize the powerful impact of invoking religion to heighten the reader’s awareness of the martyrdom or sacrifice contained in these deaths. In *The Silent Partner*, when the fictional flood recedes it reveals that “two logs had caught and hung...like a cross” (902). The connotations of this imagery would be clear to even the most casual reader.

In addition, the Pemberton Mills experience may have inspired in Phelps a desire to portray how powerful a thing the waking of a social conscience can be. Just as the author was blind to the suffering of mill hands, so initially is the protagonist of *The Silent Partner*, Perley Kelso, a young woman whose father owns a substantial share in a local textile mill.¹⁷ Upon the death of Mr. Kelso, which takes place in the novel’s first chapter, Perley inherits her father’s share. However, as Perley later learns from her fiancé and his father, the mill’s other shareholders, she has no claim to her father’s influence over or ability to actively participate in the mill’s daily operations. After a chance encounter with Sip Garth, a mill girl who befriends Perley, the latter begins to understand the limitations of her own position. Rather than resign herself to a life of evening opera trips and days spent leisurely ordering dinner by the comfort of a blazing hearth, Perley resolves to influence the mill’s culture, even if only by becoming involved with improving

¹⁷ Though it’s difficult to draw too many direct parallels between the life of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Perley Kelso—which suggests that the character was not necessarily meant as a stand-in for the author—both women suffered the loss of their mother at a young age. This similarity is interesting as both author and character grew up without a model of maternal benevolence yet attempt very earnestly to fulfill that role for others.

conditions for its most vulnerable employees—women, children, and the elderly. Critics have read *The Silent Partner* as belonging to the traditions of sentimental literature, reform literature, and benevolent maternalism. None of these interpretations is incorrect; however, each time Phelps's novel is neatly categorized it is in the service of a larger argument about the text's intent or impact. Rather than arguing in favor of any single generic classification, this essay will argue that Phelps's novel simultaneously occupies a place in each of these genres. The result of reading *The Silent Partner* as intentionally multi-generic is that it allows us to understand both the limitations of each genre as it applies to this novel, as well as the author's active engagement in creating a novel which draws upon applicable generic conventions as a means of positing a very specific argument in favor of women's work and responsible labor practices. By examining other critics' interpretations of this novel, the novel itself, and Phelps's other writings we can reach a better understanding of not just *what* the author is trying to say but *how* she is saying it and *why* it is being presented in that manner.

During her lifetime, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps published at least fourteen articles dedicated to addressing women's issues (Griffith 95).¹⁸ A frequent topic of discussion was the role of work in women's lives and the role of women in the increasingly industrialized nation. Like many of her fellow women writers, Phelps was not content to merely depict and accept women's roles as limited to the private domestic sphere. Even prior to her depiction of Perley Kelso's involvement in the world of industry, Phelps wrote in support of women engaging in work that extended beyond the tasks associated

¹⁸ All but one of these articles appeared in the *Independent* (Griffith 95). Phelps's prolific publication in the *Independent* may have been aided by her father-in-law's position as editor-in-chief.

with housekeeping. An essay written for *Harper's Monthly*, that appeared four years prior to the publication of *The Silent Partner*, "What Shall They Do?" makes a strong case for women to find a fulfilling vocation by insisting that "the brave pioneers—God bless them for it!—have broken the way for you" (523). In a subsequent essay "Why Shall They Do It?" (1868), Phelps argues that "a woman should be just as much ashamed of having nothing to do as a man" (219). Much like Louisa May Alcott's early assertions in *Hospital Sketches*, these essays show Phelps to be wrestling with a way to create a place for women in a society which values individualism and self-reliance. However, in addition to demonstrating that women do work and are active participants in an industrialized society, rather than merely attempting to make work outside the home acceptable, Phelps is making the argument that women *should* work and that work is desirable not just for society for the women themselves who might find self-fulfillment through engaging in labor of their choosing. Clearly, this is not an argument for lower-class women who must work in order to physically sustain themselves and their families. Instead, the author presents an argument in favor of work for women who, due to a lack of financial need, might not otherwise seek employment outside their kitchens or parlors. In "Why Shall They Do It?," Phelps also makes the point that "nobody ever asks a girl what she shall 'be'" though "their brothers are imbued in the cradle with the fixed idea that they are to *be* something" (219). This discrepancy, for Phelps, leads to women seeking out and making fewer opportunities for themselves because they haven't been raised to see work as a right or a responsibility. The lack of opportunities becomes self-perpetuating cycle of limitation for women who might want to find employment. By encouraging women of all classes to consider working outside of the domestic sphere,

Phelps also makes a case for pushing the boundaries of what has been traditionally considered appropriate women's work.

In addition to actively participating in and encouraging a public discourse on women's issues, Phelps's private correspondence with other authors reflects the depths of her concern for this topic. A letter to John Greenleaf Whittier, written in 1871, the year of *The Silent Partner's* publication, implores the poet to take up the role of women as a topic, stating: "I am, as perhaps you may suppose, almost *invested* in the 'Woman Cause.' It grows upon my conscience, as well as my enthusiasm, every day. It seems to me to be the first work God has to be done right now" (Phelps qtd. in Bennett, italics in original). It is interesting to note that by employing the word "invested" to describe her relationship to the issue and then by emphasizing that word only, Phelps's is clearly borrowing from economic diction to heighten the reader's sense of the depth of her concern for women. Also to note is the further progression of the letter, Phelps transitions from the economic language of reform, to mentioning conscience, and then concludes by invoking religion and inviting God into the conversation. Even in her private letters we can see the author mixing generic tropes to heighten the impact her cause might have on a reader. In short, if they aren't inclined to respond to the practical, economic appeal then she is not above including an emotional appeal as well. The range of rhetorical strategies contained in a single paragraph of this letter is indicative of the degree to which Phelps's literary habits inform every aspect of her life, and vice versa.

According to George V. Griffith, in 1873 Elizabeth Stuart Phelps also initiated a correspondence between herself and George Eliot, the British author in whose novels the woman question was also a central focus. The brief exchange of fifteen letters began with

Phelps writing to praise Eliot's *Middlemarch* which had just completed serialization in *Harper's Weekly* on 26 February.¹⁹ Though Eliot and Phelps were both interested in women's issues, the latter might be seen as ahead of the curve in that two years prior to *Middlemarch*'s publication, Perley Kelso had rejected marriage in favor of forging her own life and working towards the betterment of the mill hands while *Middlemarch*'s heroine, Dorothea Brooke, abandons her plans of improving the cottages of her miserly uncle's tenants, choosing instead to marry and assist the miserable clergyman, Casaubon, with his life-long scholarly project. In fact, while Perley goes on to assert her independence through opting to pursue a life of benevolent maternalism and reformist thinking, Dorothea idealizes her subservient relationship to Casaubon as that of John Milton's daughter to her father. Eventually, Dorothea's mistake is remedied not by her own active rejection of Casaubon but by his death and her decision to marry his cousin, whom she actually loves, instead.

The role of marriage, both in Phelps's and Eliot's novels is pertinent, not just for what the former's indicates in terms of genre—that will be touched upon later in this chapter—but because it is directly addressed in the authors' correspondence as a critical issue facing women. In her initial letter to Eliot, Phelps writes:

You have written the novel of the century—but that is one matter; you have almost analyzed a woman—and that is quite another. I say “almost,” because I believe it remains for you to finish what you have begun and that *Middlemarch* itself is the hint and proposition for the study of

¹⁹ *Harper's Weekly* published installments of *Middlemarch* from 16 December 1871 to 15 February 1873.

another problem, with a great solution. One of our leading theologians said to me: "Dorothea should never have married." So faintly can theology comprehend her! Rather should she never accept wifedom as a metier. The woman's personal identity is a vast undiscovered country with which society has yet to acquaint itself, and by which it is yet to be revolutionized. (Qtd. in Griffith, 95)

In this passage Phelps is clearly stating that marriage itself need not be considered a hindrance to women; in fact she seems to allude to the idea that women should have choices made available to them. The problem lies not with the institution of marriage itself but with women and society blindly accepting wifedom as the only vocation in which a woman might thrive. The final assertion regarding "woman's personal identity" suggests Phelps to view women as being in possession of a great amount of personal depth and potential that has the power to significantly change society should society choose to acknowledge or legitimize it. As this letter comes two years after publication of *The Silent Partner*, we can read the statement as a further articulation of ideas that Phelps explored in her novel. In addition, it draws our attention to Phelps's ideas about marriage, a sentimental trope which she manipulated in order to motivate women towards pursuing reform outside the domestic sphere.

During the course of coming to realize her purpose as a champion of the suffering mill hands, Perley Kelso rejects not one but two marriage proposals. First she declines the repeated offer from Maverick Hayle, a junior partner in the mills, and then from Stephen Garrick, a self-made man who has risen from laboring in the mills to becoming a partner with the junior and senior Hayles. It is easy to understand Perley's rejection of Maverick,

as she tries desperately to explain the awakening of her social conscience—evidenced by her guilt over the realization that she'd spent three thousand dollars on a mere shawl, with no regard to the suffering and poverty of others—he amuses himself by arranging the shawl in question on Perley “as if she had been a lay-figure for some crude and gorgeous design” (854). Even when he tires of dressing Perley up and admiring her beauty, the latter being typically preferred to listening, Maverick's focused attention still does not allow him to comprehend her thoughts and concerns. When Perley tires of attempting to explain herself and observes that Maverick appears incapable of understanding her point of view, he rather pathetically replies, “I do *not* think I understand” (856). Maverick's density in the face of Perley's efforts to articulate her concern for the mill hands makes it easy for the reader to accept her refusal of a man who would, for practical reasons, have been considered a desirable suitor. Not only is Maverick unable to understand Perley, he refuses to even try.

Perley's rejection of Stephen Garrick, on the other hand, proves to be more of a challenge for the reader. Because Garrick's career has followed the upward trajectory of a self-made man who began on the mill floors and won advancement to the position of partner through hard work, his capacity for understanding Perley's goals and sympathizing with her desire to help the mill workers makes him, at first glance, a much more suitable match. Furthermore, when the reader is first introduced to Garrick he is emerging from a weekly prayer meeting with the mill hands. We are quickly informed, through Sip Garth, that Garrick has been attending the prayer meeting in the “dingy hall” since he “was in the dressing-room himself” and that though people expected him to quit after his promotion—ostensibly to attend a more prestigious religious service—he had

not (851). Garrick's desire to remain in close proximity to the mill hands, despite the increase in his own status and fortune, is similar to Perley's willingness to visit the workers in their homes and to invite them into her own. Though Perley's gestures might be measured as habit rather than benevolence, that both characters are willing to cross the distinct boundaries of class lines, at the very least, suggests a capacity for them to understand or sympathize with each other.

In "The True Woman," an essay published the same year as *The Silent Partner*, Phelps argues that the "true woman" rather than society's ideal version of woman will be revealed "when marriage and motherhood no more complete a woman's mission to the world than marriage and fatherhood complete a man's" (272). This statement certainly supports the novel's attempts to recommend sacrificing marriage in order for a woman to pursue her life's work. However, in her own life, Phelps's attitude towards marriage did change over time. As Anne E. Boyd observes, Phelps recognized that by choosing to remain single she had sacrificed the companionship that comes with love and had closed herself off from the possibility of entering into a happy and mutually beneficial relationship (74). Phelps did eventually marry at the age of forty-four to Henry Dickinson Ward, a man seventeen years her junior, but despite claims of happiness in her autobiography, critics are skeptical as to her actual satisfaction in the marriage.²⁰ According to Boyd, by the time *Chapters from a Life* was written, Phelps and Ward had been living apart for many years.

²⁰ Boyd's skepticism as to Phelps's sincerity in statements such as: "A literary woman's best critic is her husband; and I cannot express in these few words the debt which I am proud to acknowledge to him who has never hindered my life's work by one hour..." (*Chapters from a Life*, 243) stems largely from the fact that only five pages of the 278 page autobiography are given to discussing Ward. Though Phelps's reluctance to discuss her husband may indicate concern over the decorum of publicly discussing her private life, it is important to note that her marriage was not especially harmonious.

Because Phelps married so many years after *The Silent Partner* was written, the shift in her thinking need not necessarily be brought to bear on a discussion of marriage in that novel. Yet the notion that Perley and Sip are making a sacrifice in order to pursue their passions for reform is important. After rejecting Dirk Burdock's proposal on the basis that she'll "never bring a child into the world to work in the mills," Sip returns to her tenement and reflects, crying, "I don't see why I couldn't have had *that*, leastways...I haven't ever had much else. I don't see why *that* should go too" (905, 906, emphasis in original). Phelps's purpose in this scene is two-fold. First, she demonstrates to the reader that Sip's recognition that in choosing independence over marriage she closes herself off from the companionship—both physical and emotional—of a man who was a suitable match for her and whom she genuinely liked. Second, Phelps's shows the reader that in order for women to pursue a life of fulfilling work sacrifices, though not ideal, are required. Both readings demonstrate the limited options facing women in the nineteenth-century; having it all is simply not a possibility they even consider.

In addition to providing social commentary, Phelps uses the marriage trope as a moment to turn sentimental literature out on its ear. Rather than writing a heroine who longs for marriage and the resulting chance to positively affect the domestic sphere, Phelps constructs a narrative in which domestic duties take a backseat to one's ability to effect change in the public sphere. Significantly, Perley's suitors each possess attributes which make them appear a good match for her—in the case of Maverick his social position and wealth and in the case of Garrick his sympathy with the mill hands' struggles—so that we can be sure her choice to decline them is motivated by something other than a simple lack of chemistry. For Susan Albertine, Perley's rejection of marriage

has a basis in her realization that “as long as she remains unmarried and independent, she has a legal right to her property” (244). However, while property rights might play a small role in Perley’s decision, as her inherited wealth facilitates the ability to pursue philanthropic projects, it is doubtful that materialism should be read as the primary motive behind Perley’s refusal to marry any of her suitors. In fact, Phelps is careful to demonstrate that the only property for which Perley cares very deeply is her own time and the energy she can make available to furthering her cause. Throughout the course of the novel Perley shows increasingly little interest in material possessions—feeling guilty about past purchases which included expensive shawls, jewelry boxes, silver tea sets, and the scenting of her carriage cushions—but her interest in what she can do for others is consistently valued.

In the novel’s first chapter, before Perley has lost all interest in Maverick, Phelps describes the young woman as taking a “keen, appreciative enjoyment in having a lazy lover; he gave her something to do; he was an occupation in himself.” This allows the reader to see that Perley is less interested in the actions Maverick performs on her behalf than she is in the fact that his apathy affords her the opportunity to act. This revelation certainly shifts the balance of power in their relationship away from the perceived norm of a dominant male because it demonstrates Perley to be happily in control. Phelps also goes on to explain that Perley “had indeed a weakness for an occupation” (814). Thus we see that Perley, much like Louisa May Alcott’s heroine of *Hospital Sketches* is not a demure, retiring young woman but is an innately active figure that both desires and seeks action instinctively. Though this revelation might seem at first glance to wholly align Perley with the ideals of benevolent maternalism it is important to note that, while she

does eventually employ herself in activities that benefit others, her motivation is not initially described as benevolent. From the novel's onset Perley does not crave action for the sake of helping others; instead she simply enjoys being occupied. The idea that a woman might seek action not merely for benevolence but for pleasure certainly expands benevolent maternalism to include not just selfless duty but self-fulfillment. Benevolence occurs as an outlet for a restless spirit, not as the means to subdue a restless spirit by helping others.

Though benevolence literature challenged sentimentalism's "emphasis on affections and relations," Phelps's suggestion that a woman might take pleasure in reformist actions leaves more potential for empowerment than either aforementioned genre (Bauer 55). While Dale Bauer's essay, "'In the Blood': Sentiment, Sex, and the Ugly Girl" focuses primarily on Catty Garth, Sip's sister, as an example of how novels such as *The Silent Partner* reject sentimental literature's repression of sexuality and demonstrate how "pleasure was made viable for middle-class women" (59). Of course, though Phelps does not go so far as to claim sexual pleasure or even sexual desire for Perley,²¹ reserving it instead for marginal characters such as Catty, I would argue that the overt acknowledgement of the pleasure Perley derives from her labors does suggest a degree of progress. By removing the presence of a male figure from *The Silent Partner's* equation for female happiness, the author empowers women to seek their own pleasure outside the domestic sphere, whether that pleasure take the form of Catty's promiscuity or Perley's charitable projects.

²¹ Phelps carefully asserts Perley's chaste purity by frequently describing her as appearing in white dresses and also in the associations that can be drawn from her first name.

Furthermore, Phelps inverts the marriage trope of sentimentalism by having characters perform tasks outside, rather than inside, of the domestic sphere “for love.” While love is a frequent motivator in sentimental literature where authors intend to motivate readers to action by affecting their emotions, love is frequently invoked in *The Silent Partner* as a means of explaining things to Catty Garth, a girl who was born deaf, mute, and with a reduced intellectual capacity due to the long hours her mother worked near loud milling machinery while pregnant. Because she cannot communicate verbally, Catty spells things out in a sort of pidgin sign language that she and Sip have developed. This limited communication becomes even more challenging once Catty loses her eyesight due to constant exposure to fibers in the mill. That love is portrayed as a means of appealing to a character who cannot clearly communicate with the world suggests two interpretations. First, it suggests that purely emotional appeals should, perhaps, be reserved for individuals who are not deemed capable of intellectual reasoning. This interpretation would suggest that Phelps is critiquing purely sentimental appeals for hinting that female readers’ lack the capacity to comprehend a more complex and nuanced rationale for action. The fact that Catty is often compelled to behave—whether that entails sitting still, going back to bed, or ceasing to wander aimlessly around town in the middle of the night—“for love’s sake” also hints at the suggestion that emotional appeals may be a way to manipulate rather than reason with women.

Another, perhaps more direct, interpretation of love’s role in this novel is that Phelps wishes to reconcile her reformist call to action with sentimental and benevolent appeals which might have been more familiar, and therefore more acceptable, to her readers. To insist that women venture out into the world and work “for their own sake”

hardly inspires the same sense of noble purpose and self-sacrifice captured by the suggestion that it be done “for love’s sake.” Though her essays argue for women to find self-fulfillment and even pleasure in work, Phelps clearly recognizes that the most effective reform literature motivates the many, not the few. By invoking familiar language and a familiar motivation to encourage readers to step outside of their comfort level and engage in unfamiliar behavior, Phelps makes independently pursued philanthropy seem less alien to readers.

The interpretation of Phelps’s invoking love as a literary device to bridge the expanse between the familiar and the unfamiliar can certainly be supported by the scene in which Perley visits Catty and Sip at their home. Immediately following Sip’s description of Catty’s uncontrollable behavior—it seems the latter is in the habit of running away, drinking, and “worse”²²—Catty enters the room. Rather than listen to Sip’s request that she approach the women, “Catty dear stood scowling in the middle of the room, a sullen, ill-tempered, ill-controlled, uncontrollable Catty dear as one could ask to see.” The ironic repetition of the phrase “Catty dear” underscores Sip and Perley’s attempt to view Catty in a sympathetic light an effort that is seemingly rewarded when the stubborn Catty is compelled to behave “for love’s sake” (838). Even more interesting, however, than the portrayal of what compels Catty to action is the narrator’s analysis of Perley’s motivations. In response to an outburst from Sip who, upon noting the juxtaposition of the clean and pretty Perley next to the dirty and deformed Catty, exclaims that the former need only look at the latter to determine the influence of a life

²² Dale Bauer interprets “worse” to imply sexual promiscuity though Phelps’s ambiguity here obviously allows room for other interpretations which might include other transgressive behaviors (65).

spent in the dirt, Perley borrows Sip's own language and replies, "I look for love's sake."

In response to this claim, the narrator disrupts the scene to ask:

Is it possible? Is Miss Kelso sure? Not for a whim's sake? Not for fancy's sake? Not for the sake of an idle moment's curiosity? Not to gratify an eccentric taste,—playing my Lady Bountiful for a pretty change in a pretty life? Look at her; it is a very loathsome under lip. Look well at her; they are not pleasant eyes. An ugly girl,—a very ugly girl. For love's sake, Miss Kelso? (839)

One of the ongoing critiques of benevolent maternalism is that it preserves the hierarchical relationship between middle-class white women and those less fortunate individuals who benefit from their gestures of sympathy. In this scene, however, we can clearly see Phelps challenging that convention. Rather than letting Perley off easy, the narrator pushes back and questions her motivations for benevolence. The motivations that the narrator questions—novelty, curiosity, eccentricity, delusions of self-importance—would all reassert Perley's social and economic superiority over Catty.²³ By directly posing these questions and forcing readers to reflect upon Perley's motivations Phelps, in turn, is asking readers to consider their own motivations for helping others. Amy Schrager Lang argues that the chapter titled "Going into Society," which includes an important scene where Perley hosts a soiree and introduces her social set to the mill workers she's taken under wing, "makes us acutely conscious of the middle-class narrator" (279). If Phelps has indeed chosen to provide a middle-class narrator in order to

²³ Though "eccentricity" does not, at first glance, seem to affirm Perley's position, the connotation of that word affirms her economic status by suggesting that she has the resources to both pursue her whims and to have them excused by society.

negotiate the differences between her readers, the wealthy Perley Kelso and the impoverished Sip Garth, then certainly these questions regarding the latter's motivations for helping Sip and Catty allow the reader to see both the benefits and the limitations of benevolent maternalism, providing an almost meta-commentary upon the topic. Awareness of generic tropes and readers' expectations allow the author to very directly address and explore these issues. Additionally, the fact that Catty is repeatedly referred to as "a very ugly girl" challenges readers to reconsider their view of with whom they might sympathize. Rather than asking the reader to care about a wholesome and attractive young girl, a request that might be more easily met, Phelps points towards a more realistic portrait of a lower-class woman in need of help. Admittedly, Catty is something of an extreme case in that she is disabled in multiple ways, but this allows Phelps to present an even greater challenge to her readers, even if it does require a degree of exaggeration. And, exaggerated though it may seem, Catty's position of extreme suffering is not outside the realm of possibility. Rather than merely encouraging readers to go forth and improve society, Phelps pushes them towards self-awareness regarding their own project. Because Catty is disabled but not entirely helpless; indeed, she acts out in inappropriate ways, she becomes more of a challenge to control than the stereotypical dying child of the poor, whose helplessness is more easily managed.

Though the scene with Catty suggests that Phelps resists sentimentalizing benevolence, one should not assume that she rejects sentimental ideas entirely. Though Perley refuses to marry, she is not entirely dismissive of other women who make that choice. In what might be read as a clear acknowledgement of women's domestic labors and an appeal to married readers, Perley's reply to Garrick's unexpected marriage

proposal both asserts her desire to avoid that state but also includes a recognition of the labor required of wives. In a characteristically sensible voice Perley informs her suitor of her belief that she has “no time to think of love and marriage” because “that is a business, a trade, by itself to women” and she simply has “too much else to do” and “cannot spare the time for it” (896). Perley’s reasons for avoiding marriage are significant because they reinforce an ideal of female independence but avoid being condescending. Rather than describe marriage as something in which she does not believe or as something upon which she looks down, Perley simply doesn’t have time for it. Also, by acknowledging that marriage is a time-consuming job for women, Phelps gestures towards viewing domestic labors as just that. This interpretation serves both to legitimize domestic work but also to subtly suggest that readers are already in the habit of accepting women’s work, even if only in the domestic rather than public domain.

What might appear as authorial ambivalence—Perley’s decision to decline but also accept the domestic sphere as an appropriate locale for women’s work efforts—should be read as authorial savvy. In the introduction to a recovered short story, “The Rejected Manuscript,” the author notes that “it is clear that Phelps wants to claim that sympathy and benevolence...can go hand in hand with technological progress and business savvy” (204). While *The Silent Partner* doesn’t reveal Perley to be business savvy exactly, at least not in the sense that her efforts at reforming the mill result in financial gain or even increased productivity, the notion that the author is attempting to negotiate a space in which sympathy and benevolence need not exclude participation in the economic sphere is very important to the reading at hand. By invoking issues pertaining to domesticity and working through ideas surrounding upper class women’s

responsibility to find fulfilling work, inside or outside of the home, Phelps expands some conventional ideas of benevolence. While classic benevolence literature often establishes women's authority to work outside the home, provided it's in the interest of helping the less fortunate, Phelps challenges the notion that the domestic sphere must be the point of departure or even the point to which women return.

While Phelps may have been attempting to revise readers' view of the domestic sphere as necessarily central to women's lives regardless of their efforts outside the home, she may also be read as revising readers' perception of the public sphere itself. Susan Albertine notes that "even at its most censorious, popular fiction of the late nineteenth century reflects and sustains the trend toward greater participation in the public sphere by white women—including married women—of the upper class" (241). Yet, while women may have been increasingly participating in activities outside of the home, a common trope in benevolence literature, *The Silent Partner* opens up the possibility of creating a domesticated public space. The challenge of encouraging social reform while reconciling the divide between the private and public is clearly at state in benevolence literature. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson explains:

Behind the explicit plea for social reform lies the implicit task of framing a semi-public, socially and morally empowering role for heroines, narrators, and readers. Each narrative formulates the figure of the benevolent, maternal, white reformer as a new social position for middle-class women, whose opportunities for achieving status from economic production dwindled as the private and public realms diverged in nineteenth-century America. (563)

The suggestion that Phelps's novel might take this formula one step further comes not only from Perley's decision to eschew the traditional female role of wife and mother but also from male characters' explicit lack of involvement in her project. Rather than performing acts of benevolence within parameters defined solely by men, Perley's financial resources allow her to largely dictate the terms of her own reform endeavors. As a result, she possesses a symbolic masculinity because it signals symbolic power.

Admittedly, Perley's status as a "silent" rather than active partner in the mills comes about because Maverick and his father refuse to give her employment in an official capacity. Also, the right to even consider herself as part owner of the mills stems directly from her father's bequest. But while male figures may be responsible for the circumstance from which Perley begins her philanthropic pursuits, they do not define the parameters of her project. Instead, she defies social conventions and the opinion of male figures such as Maverick, to determine what actions she believes will benefit the mill hands most.

The Silent Partner has been described as belonging to the "class of reform novels that did not eschew the romantic subject" while "etch[ing] with varying degrees of relief the grim realities of industrial life" to further an agenda "primarily concerned with delineating women's roles in industrial reform" (65).²⁴ Though this assessment is a good one it certainly invites the reader of Phelps's novel to question exactly what is women's role in reform literature. Given the author's interest in women's issues and the degree to which she stressed the importance of encouraging women to seek work and satisfaction

²⁴ In this grouping Mary V. Marchand also includes Rebecca Harding Davis's *Margret Howth* (1862), Margaret Deland's *The Wisdom of Fools* (1897), and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's *The Portion of Labor* (1901).

outside the home, it should come as no surprise that Perley Kelso is not content to merely write a check or even take in just a single sick mill girl. Rather than attempt to help the workers in a sentimental way and focusing her efforts on spiritual salvation—indeed, as this essay will discuss later, the responsibility for spiritually affecting the mill workers falls to Sip—or taking a more personal approach to benevolence benevolent maternalism and nursing the infirm with her own hands, Perley demonstrates that reform is less about directly influencing body and soul and more about influencing structures that exceed the bounds of the individual by provoking substantial institutional changes. Perley’s participation in benevolent maternalism, performing domesticity in the public sphere, positions her solidly between sentimentalism and benevolence.

Of course, Perley’s interest in large-scale reform does not mean that she completely ignores the possibility of inspiring change through direct personal interaction. Her motivation to even pursue philanthropic endeavors stems largely from a chance encounter with a single mill girl. Furthermore, we do see Perley interacting one-on-one with mill hands ranging from Sip and Catty to Bub Mell, the young boy whose smoking and accidental death serve to illustrate the dangers facing child laborers, to Old Bijah, the broken-down, elderly worker whose efforts at labor reform have gotten him blacklisted and unable to support himself, and Nynee Mell, Bub’s pretty older sister who is rescued from corruption when Perley has Irish Jim removed from the girl’s workspace. Although Perley interacts with each of these mill workers directly, each is clearly meant to represent a larger argument for labor reform—help for the disabled, restrictions on child labor, support for elderly workers who have given their health to the mills, labor’s right to negotiate with management, and the danger facing young women who work in too

close a proximity with those who would exploit their innocence. In a sense, while these exchanges may seem personal they are each actually arguments against larger systemic problems facing the mill. Each time Perley assists one of these characters, Phelps is really positing an argument about changing labor practices at an institutional level. Yet, because of the manner in which these arguments are made—through benevolent actions rather than consistent political stumping, though Perley makes her fair share of appeals to her upper class friends—maternalism and reform collide.

Just as *The Silent Partner* invoked sentimental tropes of marriage and love as a way to heighten the reader's sense that the industrial atmosphere rendered these ideals more than merely difficult to obtain, so does the novel similarly treat maternity and motherly influence. Because both Perley and Sip lose their mothers at a young age, much as Phelps did, they are without female role models who can model benevolent behavior. As a result, both women must decide for themselves what form that behavior takes. This moves the text away from a prescribed ideal of benevolent maternalism and suggests to the reader that the individual woman might choose her own path for philanthropy. Jill Bergman argues that in *The Gates Ajar*, a novel that she identifies as a clear model of benevolent maternalism, "Phelps's emphasis on women and children underscores her message of the damaging effects of poverty on the motherhood ideal," drawing attention to the ways in which economic hardship render mothers unable to mother; in the best cases neglecting their babies, in the worst instances killing them (198). In *The Silent Partner* Phelps takes this formula one step further as a way to motivate her readers to action. In the mill town of Five Falls mothers are not merely neglectful; they are nonexistent. Not a single primary character has a mother who survives until the novel's

end: Perley's and Sip's mothers are dead before the narrative begins and Bub Mell's mother is sick at the story's onset and dead by its conclusion. In fact, the only remotely maternal figure who survives is Mrs. Silver, the wealthy mother of Fly, Perley's friend. Because Mrs. Silver appears only twice in the narrative, each time more in the capacity of peripheral chaperone than as a figure of note, she can't be said to represent any argument for or against benevolence. Additionally, her wealth excludes her from being a potential comment upon the relationship between poverty and motherhood. Though she does attempt to mother Perley, as seen in the way she comments on upon the younger woman's taste in perfume, her insights are largely dismissed and serve only to bring about a mention of Perley's real mother. Mrs. Silver's ineffectuality then draws the reader's attention to the absence of substantial maternal influence, an awareness that is further heightened by the fact that Perley's mother passed away when the girl was only six and as a woman she feels "always some awkwardness at the mention of a dead parent for whom propriety required her to mourn" (815). That Perley possesses no emotional connection or loyalty to her mother shifts the terms of benevolence. While some texts might attempt to model a very specific type of benevolence for readers, and one certainly can't say that Phelps isn't providing an example through Perley and Sip, this novel does open up the possibility for self-defined benevolence—a type of charitable activity that is not based on pre-existing social codes but which women can determine for themselves. An important implication of Perley's motherless yet kindhearted state is that privilege, or money, can help to substitute for a mother's influence if it moves a woman to use her resources for the good of others.

As mentioned earlier, Phelps's protagonist also shifts the terms of benevolence from merely allowing women to move between to the domestic and public spheres to demonstrating a domestication of the public. With this in mind, it is important to note that a good deal of the reform Perley institutes in the mill town of Five Falls has to do with improving the workers' housing conditions. Thus, rather than separate her domestic space from the public space, Perley sets out to transform and affect the domestic spaces of others. Aside from her own home, the first domestic space in which we view Perley is that of Sip and Catty. Described as "the dampest room" in the tenement with "cellar smells and river smells about it, and with the gutter smells and drain smells and with unclassified smells of years settled and settling in its walls and ceiling" Sip and Catty's home is anything but inviting (836). On the evening in question, however, Perley has beaten Sip home to start a fire, light the lamp, and draw the curtains. Though she is not responsible for these tasks in her own home, due to the presence of servants, Perley has no qualms whatsoever about imposing upon and Sip and taking charge of her space. The second domestic scene in which we see Perley attempting to affect someone else's home is in chapter five when she follows Bub Mell back to the tenement in which his family resides. Much like the description of Sip and Catty's home, the Mell's dwelling is described more in olfactory terms than visual ones and the smell is one which "quite filled the room" (845). When Mr. Mell reveals that Maverick is the owner of this property, "the blaze in Miss Kelso's eyes went out, paled by the sudden fire in her cheek" (846). The importance of placing Perley Kelso in a position to directly affect these people's living conditions is highlighted further when, on her way home from the Mell's, Perley again encounters Sip. Remarking on the number of people walking about the town

at night Perley observes, “One would think that they had no homes.” Sip replies, “They have houses.” The distinction between a home and a house is significant because it allows Perley to engage issues of domesticity outside the private sphere. Rather than suggesting that women ought to tend to their own hearths, Phelps is clearly making an argument for a woman to go out in the world and set fires to warm other’s rooms.

However, Perley does not stop with affecting the few living situations mentioned. Rather than being content to only improve the domestic spaces of the workers she encounters personally, Perley does not see change on that small a scale as change enough. In a progression which clearly marks the narrative as shifting from small-scale benevolence to large-scale reform, Perley intends to change the plans for the new mill to include a library, a reading room, and some new tenement houses. Now, rather than simply building a fire or donating a painting to brighten a living space, as she does with Sip, Perley wants to extend her efforts to creating educational resources and more livable domestic spaces for the mill workers at large. Upon being informed that the business “cannot afford any more experiments in philanthropy,” Perley offers to pay for the improvements herself (855). As a result, Maverick’s strongest objection to charity—that it’s simply not profitable for the mill—is easily overcome because of Perley’s access to her own wealth. However, in addition to being a matter of finance, this scene is indicative of a shift in thinking about reform. Rather than expecting domestic change to occur at the individual level, Phelps presents an argument for institutional change to begin at the domestic level. Rather than relying solely on her domestic instincts to improve the tenements, Perley relies upon her financial ability to affect business practices as a way to give her workers, not just houses, but homes.

However, in the aforementioned scene and others, Phelps makes it clear that the primary problem facing a woman with reformist tendencies is stubborn resistance from men. When Stephen Garrick brings the mill plans to Perley for her opinion, he seeks not her thoughts on the philanthropic improvements or even as to whether or not the facilities are conducive to productivity, but only as to whether or not she thinks that the moldings should be made of Gloucester granite. Frustrated by this reassertion of her limited influence, Perley explains that she would “much rather be a brick-maker” and have a say in the creation of substantial structures than be limited to giving her opinions on the color of moldings (858). Though plans for the new mill fall from the novel’s primary concern after this scene, we do learn through a comment made by Fly, Perley’s vapid socialite friend who happily marries Maverick, that one can hardly estimate the amount of money Perley has invested into “her libraries, and her model tenements, and all that” (889). That this progress goes on quietly behind the stories scenes is important. Rather than showing the reader ribbon-cutting ceremonies and awarding Perley Kelso with the Five Falls Humanitarian of the Year Award, an honor that likely does not exist, the author asks the reader to take for granted that Perley and her plans will persevere in a quiet, perhaps even silent, manner. Perhaps the best way to overcome male objections to female influence is to simply ignore them and proceed by drawing upon one’s own resources. Invisible though Perley’s building additions may be to the reader, these improvements are presumably not invisible to the mill hands.

In her essay “Panic Fiction: Women’s Responses to the Antebellum Economic Crisis,” Mary Templin argues for the consideration of a new genre of nineteenth-century women’s literature, panic fiction. For Templin, novels of this genre “advocate women’s

expertise in the economic realm and propose domestically oriented solutions to economic problems” (2). Though the article only briefly gestures towards *The Silent Partner*, not even as a direct example of panic fiction but as an example of that genre’s legacy, much can be gained from considering the text in regard to the larger argument being posited about literary movements. Templin writes:

Reexamining these texts today as a genre—that is, not as isolated literary efforts, but as part of a collective response by middle-class women to economic circumstances—offers scholars an opportunity to advance our understanding of the roles such fiction played in both antebellum economic discourse and conceptions of class and gender. (2-3)

While Phelps’s novel is excluded due to its being beyond the scope of Templin’s study, it is also useful to think about *The Silent Partner* as part of a larger generic discourse.

Though panic fiction, as defined by Templin, often centers around a narrative of financial hardship on the domestic front and the female characters who model an appropriate response by conserving resources and offering creative solutions to economic challenges, Phelps’s text explores economic responsibility from a different perspective. Perley is wealthy from the novel’s beginning and though she may show a shift in priorities—rather than buying expensive items for herself she turns to funding expensive buildings for the mill hands—we are never given the sense that her philanthropy requires even so much as a tightening of her belt. Rather than being an example of panic fiction, per Templin’s definition, *The Silent Partner* can be seen as furthering the discussion of women’s economic role in society. Not so much a novel about how to economize, Phelps’s text demonstrates reallocation. If we read Perley’s efforts from the vantage point presented

earlier—an effort to affect extend domestic concerns to the institutional sphere—and wish to contemplate this novel as clear descendant of panic fiction, it is worth entertaining the idea that, though it is a mill town, Five Falls becomes Perley Kelso's own domestic sphere through her attachment to its inhabitants and her willingness to expend all her energies making it inhabitable through gestures of maternal benevolence.

Rather than writing a merely didactic novel in which readers are instructed towards a specific brand of benevolence, one which enforces a hierarchical relationship between noble benevolent maternal figure and lowly recipient of charity, *The Silent Partner* undermines the reader's ability to wholly identify herself as Lady Bountiful. In effect, Phelps places the reader in the subordinate position of recipient, thus forcing a kind of identification with the usual object of charity. Chapter four indicates a dramatic shift away from a third-person narrative and into the second person. Rather than being privy to the actions of the lovely and wealthy Perley, the reader is suddenly told, "you are one of 'the hands' in the Hayle and Kelso Mills." What follows is a very detailed description of life as "surely neither head nor heart" but as "the fingers of the world," beginning with a meager breakfast consumed while dressing and ending with feeling to miserable to even go home in the evening. Scattered throughout the day are musings on the "experiment of death and a wadded coffin." Should readers have any misunderstanding about their position or overestimate their own humanity, they are told, "you are a godless little creature" (833-34). By changing the reader's relationship to the charitable object, Phelps makes an argument for benevolence that doesn't merely capitalize on the reader's desire to do good works but attempts to make the reader understand the full implications of poverty and sadness. Admittedly, a second person

narrative read in the comfort of a well-appointed drawing room can't be seen as a guerrilla tactic but it is evidence that Phelps is willing to experiment in an attempt to reach her reader. For Lisa Long, "reform is not a communal project in *The Silent Partner*, but an individual journey" (269). Perley and Sip don't recruit or convert others for reform—though Sip's street preaching can be seen as an attempt to reach her peers; instead they forge their own specific path despite obstructions placed in their way. The variety of ways Phelps attempts to appeal to readers, including utilizing familiar forms and challenging readers to embody a different subject position, also encourages readers to consider their own individual journey of reform.

While Phelps's novel may not embody a clear or distinct pedigree from any of the genres discussed thus far in this essay—sentimental, benevolent, reform, or even panic fiction—identifying these literary movements as ongoing and inclusive, rather than contained and limited by arbitrary chronological events, enables us to understand the author's motivations for artistic choices which might, at times, seem incompatible with her message.

In her 1939 biography of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Mary Bennett likens *The Silent Partner* to a less successful Dickens novel. Phelps's failure, Bennett argues, lies in her inability to present a one-sided story in which the mill owners are clearly without humanity. Instead, she claims that Phelps "defeated her own purpose"—which Bennett identifies as writing "a successful propaganda novel"—by failing to present an "uncompromising" portrait of "right being opposed directly to wrong" (62-63). Of course, the very term "propaganda novel" suggests Bennett's disapproval of Phelps's purpose, especially given the time period in which Bennett wrote. In effect, Bennett

criticizes Phelps for the degree of narrative complexity that allows the novel to function on so many levels. Though the novel may lack a clear villain, per se, that does not in any way dilute its message for discerning readers. By attributing a degree of humanity to all characters, mill owners and mill workers alike, Phelps's novel is perhaps more effective because it does not become a caricature of the very large and very real issue at hand. Given that many readers of the novel might in fact be in a position of wealth rather than poverty—a possibility that seems especially likely given their higher literacy rates and access to publications—the author would have had nothing to gain by moving her argument away from the realm of the real and into the realm of the exaggerated. Phelps herself acknowledges the importance of truth and fact in the brief preface to her novel where she cites much of the information as coming directly from reports issued by the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics. Though this is a story, it is not a fiction.

In her study of why and how postbellum women turned towards literature as a field in which to realize their creative ambitions, Anne Boyd points to an 1880 essay titled, "The Transitional American Woman" by Kate Wells. Rather than embracing the cultural shifts as positive for women, Wells sees the potential opportunities as burdens, complaining: "Formerly, to be a good housekeeper, an anxious mother, an obedient wife, was the *ne plus ultra* of female endeavor,—to be all this for others' sakes. Now it is to be more than one is, for one's own sake" (817). For Boyd, Well's essay is a lament over the loss of an idealized womanhood that was being replaced by conceptions of "the new woman" (1-2). Though the possibilities opening up to women may have dismayed some, in the context of discussing Phelps's literary endeavors much can be made of Wells's title. Despite her reservations, Wells clearly recognizes this historical moment as a period

of change and one in which definitions of American womanhood were not static but in transition. Though the plurality of choices may have been overwhelming to some, for champions of women's issues, such as Phelps, the increasing number of possibilities made available to women was not only desirable but inspiring. Given the difficulty even authors such as Wells had identifying a single portrait of what a new woman would be, it only makes sense that an author so invested in reaching women would carefully craft her novel so as to embrace multiple versions of femininity in an attempt to blur genres as a means to reach multiple readers.

In her autobiography, Phelps herself engages the limitations that some critics place, not just upon women, but upon any artist by attempting to classify their work in a single way. For her, "a literary artist portrays life as it is, or has been, as it might be, or as it should be. We classify him a realist, the romanticist, or the idealist... Our book reveals what life is to us. Life is to us what we are" (260). For a female writer who sought to challenge limitations of what it meant to be a woman, it only makes sense that her writings should also challenge the generic limitations of what it means to be the product of a woman's pen.

CHAPTER THREE

Sentimentalism, Realism, Naturalism, and Regionalism: Generic Creolization in Kate Chopin's *At Fault*

“There are stories that seem to write themselves, and others which positively refuse to be written ... I am completely at the mercy of unconscious selection. To such an extent is this true, that what is called the polishing up process has always proved disastrous to my work, and I avoid it, preferring the integrity of crudities to artificialities.”

—Kate Chopin

To describe Kate Chopin as a nonconformist is the utmost understatement. Even before she began writing novels and stories that would challenge readers' perceptions of what it meant to be a woman at the end of the nineteenth century, the young wife and mother of six “smoked Cuban cigarettes, promenaded in her extravagantly fashionable clothes, lifted her skirts too high when she crossed the street” all of which had the effect of shocking her conservative Louisiana neighbors (Toth 20). Recognizing Chopin's refusal to conform to a socially prescribed vision of what it meant to be a wife and mother is a useful place to begin examining how and why her writing challenged preconceived notions of what constituted “appropriate” women's writing. Just as the author resisted conforming to expectations of womanhood, so does her writing refuse to conform to critical expectations regarding form and content. The end result, however, for both the author and her texts is not a perverse or stubborn denial of norms but a creative willingness to push boundaries and test limitations.

Much can and has been said about Kate Chopin's most well-known novel, *The Awakening* (1899). The story of Edna Pontellier shocked readers when it was originally published but was largely forgotten before capturing the imagination of pioneering

feminist literary critics in the twentieth century. The first review of *The Awakening*, published in the *St. Louis Review* on April 30, 1899, declared the work to be “the story of a lady most foolish.” In addition to misreading or ignoring several key elements of the novel, the newspaper review identified it as Chopin’s “first long story” (Toth 336). The mistaken view that *The Awakening* constituted Chopin’s first foray into novel writing was similarly echoed in other reviews, including the one Frances Porcher wrote for the *Mirror* on May 4, 1899. In her very negative assessment of Chopin’s longer work, Porcher writes: “Of an already successful writer’s first novel one should not write, perhaps, while the spell of the book is upon one, it is something to be ‘dreamed upon,’ like a piece of wedding-cake for luck on one’s first marriage-proposal” (Qtd. in Toth 339). Ironically, Porcher’s review criticizes Edna Pontellier’s passion for a man to whom she is not married, while simultaneously invoking all manner of matrimonial imagery to equate Chopin’s novel with a prophetic piece of wedding cake.²⁵ Amusingly enough, *The Awakening* was actually not Chopin’s first published novel so if it were to be accurately likened to any variety of cake, it probably wouldn’t be the dreamily chaste confection that Porcher wished to enjoy.

While *The Awakening* is without a doubt Kate Chopin’s most famous work, much scholarly work remains to be done on her first novel, the largely understudied *At Fault* (1890). Written almost a decade before the text that secured Chopin’s place in the twentieth century canon, *At Fault* is the product of a less experienced author who has not become rigid in her approach to storytelling and who willingly experiments with generic

²⁵ Wedding lore claims that if an unmarried woman places a piece of wedding cake beneath her pillow, the cake will prompt dreams of her future husband (marthastewartweddings.com).

conventions in her efforts to find one which will best serve the narrative and treat the multiple themes at hand. Because it was written so very early in Chopin's literary career, after the publication of only two short stories and a poem, *At Fault* is an interesting case study in the development of an authorial voice. However, given the myriad plotlines and characters crowded into the pages of the rather brief novel, it is no wonder that placing this work within the tradition of a single genre should be so problematic. Rather than suggesting that readers consider *At Fault* to be genealogically stable in terms of literary movements—no argument will be made for the text's belonging to a single classification—this essay will argue that the novel's form mirrors its content, resulting in a creolization of genre.

Within the pages of *At Fault*, the word "Creole" is largely a racial and cultural term used to broadly describe "any person or thing indigenous to the Louisiana territory" (Green and Caudle 227). More specifically, according to Joseph G. Tregle Jr., "the doctrine of the Creole" can be explained as a belief in the tradition of "Louisianians born to the descendents of the French and Spanish, [who are] almost uniformly genteel and cultured aristocrats, above the lure of money, disdainful of physical labor" and generally above any sort of undignified struggle (228). In short, Creole can be used generally in reference to anything native to Louisiana or can specifically refer to the local aristocracy descended from European ancestors. Though these two usages of the term demonstrate at a glance the complexity inherent in the cultural, social, and racial applications of the word, these particular definitions won't be called upon to explain the generic hybridity of Chopin's novel. Instead, in order to understand how "creole" might be applied to literary genres we must first look to its usage in the field of linguistics.

According to Steven Pinker, a creole²⁶ is developed when two groups of people who do not speak the same language are suddenly put into close contact due to relocation—commonly cited examples being the American slave trade or any influx of non-English speaking immigrants—and so must develop a means for basic communication. The language that results from placing these two original languages into close contact is considered a pidgin, a form of speech which allows speakers to exchange essential information but is not governed by a complex set of grammatical rules. Pidgin languages often incorporate the use of hand gestures as a way to bridge the language divide. A creole language is born when the second generation of speakers, usually the children of original immigrants, adopts the pidgin language as their primary means of communication. However, rather than reproducing “the fragmentary word strings” that often characterize a pidgin language, the second generation of speakers “inject grammatical complexity where none existed before.” Though creoles may appear crude to an individual who is a native speaker either of original language, they are actually very systematic and not at all haphazard or random (Pinker 33-35).²⁷ Thus the creole language will bear some similarity to its parent languages but is largely viewed as a legitimate language of its own, even if it appears unrefined to those outside its system.

The description of a creole language’s initial appearance as unrefined or messy, despite possessing a sound logic of its own, echoes some of the criticism that scholars

²⁶ In Pinker’s book, the distinction between “Creole” as a term to denote race and “creole” as a word to describe a linguistic development requires that it be capitalized in the first instance and not the second.

²⁷ The example Pinker cites is of Hawaiian Creole, a language that developed on sugar plantations at the turn of the twentieth century. Observations regarding the commonalities found in creole languages—i.e. standardized word orders and grammatical markers—is used to suggest that there is “innate grammatical machinery in the brain” (35). While this essay won’t go quite so far as to argue for innate generic machinery in literature, the possibility is certainly intriguing.

have leveled against Chopin's first novel. Peggy Skaggs claimed that *At Fault* was not wholly successful because it "suffered from [the author's] lack of writing experience" and was "lacking any unity of effect," though she admits that it contains "a veritable gallery of interesting characters" (73). In "Kate Chopin's Other Novel" (1968), Lewis Leary measures *At Fault* against *The Awakening*, only to find it wanting. "It is more cluttered than the later novel," he writes, "with characters and convolutions of plot; its thesis is more overtly but less expertly enforced" (60-61). Leary, however, finishes the paragraph by complimenting Chopin's skillful rendering of dialect. It is interesting, given the definition of a creole language that both Skaggs and Leary comment on the novel's lack of order while simultaneously acknowledging the vivid character portraits and distinctive use of dialogue—Chopin's work is difficult to reign in or organize, but it is clear that a depth of meaning is contained.

The assessment of *At Fault* as cluttered and convoluted is addressed by Donna Campbell as evidence that we should read the work as a social-problem novel, a genre that "often incorporated the very features that twentieth-century critics have found so problematic: multiple subplots, a profusion of themes, and numerous characters, some seemingly extraneous" (28). The crowded characters and tangled plot lines that Leary and Campbell address—albeit to reach different conclusions—are one reason why it is constructive to read this novel as participating in multiple genres simultaneously. Though the perceived flaws of *At Fault* might be attributed to the Chopin's efforts to write a social-problem novel, these "flaws" might also be read as stemming from Chopin's attempt to address the diversity of both her setting and characters by employing a diverse range of storylines and character concerns. If Place-du-Bois, the Louisiana plantation

where the majority of *At Fault* takes place, is populated by a wide range of characters from varying racial, social, and economic backgrounds then it could stand to reason that a multiplicity of genres could be necessary to address each of the divergent plotlines in which these characters participate.

Though readers have been fairly critical of *At Fault*—even the Kate Chopin International Society cautions non-academic readers to consider avoiding Chopin’s first novel if they “fell in love with *The Awakening* ... and want to preserve that magic moment by remembering Kate Chopin as [they] knew her from Edna Pontellier’s story”—relatively little criticism has been produced on the novel, especially when compared to the vast number of studies inspired by *The Awakening* (katechopin.org). Even after the recovery of *The Awakening*, many scholars ignored the first novel altogether. In the introduction to *Modern Critical Views: Kate Chopin* (1987), Harold Bloom writes of the author, “she published two novels, *At Fault*, which I have not read, and the now celebrated *The Awakening*” (1). Despite Bloom’s easy dismissal of *At Fault*, in the twenty years since he casually admitted what no student would dare say in the classroom, more attention has been focused on Chopin’s other novel. Campbell and Leary are not the only scholars to take up the task of generic classification. Perhaps in an effort to explain why and how we should read this lesser-known work, many attempts have been made to demonstrate how it participates in a specific genre, sometimes in the service of enriching our readings of Chopin’s more famous text. Winfried Fluck identifies Chopin’s first novel as a “realistic *Bildungsroman*” in her efforts to establish the argument that *The Awakening* should be read as realistic novel that ultimately undermines that genre so as to grapple with themes that defy realism’s boundaries

(434).²⁸ Additionally, Maureen Anderson suggests that *At Fault* is an inversion of the southern pastoral tradition, an argument based largely upon the author's adept manipulation of the way gender roles are typically represented in that genre. For Anderson, identifying Chopin as subverting the southern pastoral also sets the stage for understanding some of the symbolism contained in *The Awakening*.

Whether examined on its own or in relation to *The Awakening*, *At Fault* does indeed have much to offer readers. Rather than aligning itself with any one of the particularly compelling arguments posited by other critics, this essay will draw upon those other arguments to suggest that they are, in fact, all correct to a degree. Given the diversity of genres coexisting in this single text, it stands to reason that the ultimate result of Kate Chopin's *At Fault* is the formation of a creole genre, a genre that borrows from the conventions of others in order to create its own self-governed means of representation. Reading the novel in this way allows us to see it, not merely as a deeply flawed novel—though that case can certainly be made and will be addressed here—but as an experimental novel that draws upon and subverts generic traditions in a way which may even be said to prefigure modernism's fragmentation, even if only on a formal level.²⁹ Though many of the storylines seem rather conventional, especially those that follow the development of romance between characters, the number of threads which Chopin's text picks up, follows, and unravels is extensive and the juxtaposition of issues not always expected. Though specific aspects of Chopin's plot will be discussed in

²⁸ Donna Campbell argues that the social-problem novel is not, in fact, a *Bildungsroman* despite the fact that "it frequently shares that genre's theme of education" (34).

²⁹ The relationship between the southern pastoral tradition and modernism is more fully explored in chapter five's examination of Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground*.

greater detail during this essay, a brief overview is helpful because of many readers' unfamiliarity with this novel, and also to demonstrate the wide range and complexity of issues undertaken by the author in what amounts to less than 200 pages.³⁰

Written in 1889 and 1890, *At Fault* tells the story of Thérèse Lafirme, a woman who is widowed at the age of thirty and left responsible for Place-du-Bois, the family plantation in Louisiana. At the novel's onset, Thérèse is overwhelmed by her grief and "unmindful of the disorder that gathered around her" (5). When Uncle Hiram, a plantation employee, informs Thérèse that the hands are carrying away the cotton seed she assumes control of her land and her employees, establishing herself as an adept businesswoman. One afternoon, while Thérèse is enjoying the view of her land, a businessman from St. Louis, David Hosmer, arrives and proposes building a lumber mill on Place-du-Bois. After very brief consideration, to give herself time to adjust to the idea of change, Thérèse agrees. As the novel unfolds the relationship between Thérèse and Hosmer deepens until, eventually, he declares his love for her. Alongside the development of Thérèse and Hosmer's romance is a plotline involving her nephew, Grégoire, and Hosmer's younger sister, Melicent. Although neither relationship progresses smoothly, Thérèse and Hosmer's is the first to unravel. Shortly after Hosmer has declared his love for Thérèse, Melicent inadvertently reveals that her brother has been married and divorced, a revelation that prompts Thérèse to forbid Hosmer from ever speaking of his love for her again. It is important to note that even though she is a Roman Catholic, Thérèse claims religion to be of no influence over her inability to accept the love of a man who has been divorced, instead she credits her "moral principle" (36).

³⁰ The Penguin Classics edition used for this essay is only 170 pages long.

Rather than reject Hosmer outright, Thérèse exercises her influence as the object of his love to convince him that he has neglected his responsibilities and to insist that he return to his wife, Fanny Larimore.

Thérèse's push for reconciliation comes despite Hosmer's embarrassed revelation that he and Fanny had barely known each other when they met—their relationship being based more on infatuation and physical attraction than anything substantial—and that, following the death of their three-year-old son, Fanny had become an alcoholic. Unable to deny Thérèse's wishes, a common male characteristic in *At Fault*, Hosmer reluctantly returns to St. Louis in order to remarry his wife. Hosmer convinces Fanny, who appears sober at this time, to marry him once again so he can make good on his original promise. Flattered by the attention and wishing to believe that he intends to “take care of [her] for the rest of her life,” Fanny agrees to remarry Hosmer and return with him to Louisiana. Upon hearing of Fanny's decision, her friends, the “professional time killers” Lou Dawson and Belle Worthington, express skepticism as to whether or not she'll be adequately amused on a remote and isolated southern plantation (54). Thus Part I of the novel ends with Thérèse having restored order in her personal life and, as she perceives it, in the lives of those around her, much as she had restored order on the plantation when her husband died.

As Bernard Koloski notes in “The Structure of Kate Chopin's *At Fault*,” in Part II of the novel, the order which Thérèse has created falls apart (90). Joçint, the mixed race African-American and Native-American son of a retired plantation worker, Old Morico, rebels against laboring in the mills by burning down the structure. When Grégoire discovers Joçint in the act of arson, he responds by shooting and killing him, an act which

repulses Melicent, thereby completely destroying any interest she had harbored in Thérèse's nephew. Melicent's rejection of Grégoire and her subsequent decision to leave Place-du-Bois, result in Grégoire's returning to his old habit of drinking and gambling, the combination which ultimately results in his being killed during a fight in a general store. In this half of the novel, Thérèse also realizes that by forcing Hosmer to reconcile with Fanny she has made his life miserable. Lonely, unhappy and jealous of what she perceives as Thérèse's hold over Hosmer, Fanny relapses into alcoholism. After setting out to look for alcohol on a stormy night, Fanny finds refuge in the cabin of Marie Louise, Thérèse's old nurse, a structure located dangerously close to the river. When the embankment gives way and the house is swept into the water, Hosmer dives into the water trying to save Fanny but to no avail. After so much death and loss, Hosmer returns to St. Louis with Fanny's body and Thérèse spends time in New Orleans and Paris. A year later, Hosmer and Thérèse are reunited on the train, marry two months later, and live out their happy ending at Place-du-Bois.

Even in a brief summary of *At Fault*, the novel reveals itself as rather cramped and crowded. In addition to the two romance plots, Chopin includes the story of Jocint's fatal inability to reconcile the old agricultural way of life with the rigid new system of industrialism. Also encompassed in the novel is Fanny's story, a narrative regarding the sad fate of a woman who lacks the means or the motivation to seize control of her own life, as well as the business plot that explores how Place-du-Bois is transformed from a purely agricultural establishment to one which supports diverse economic enterprises. As if these weren't enough issues for the novel to wrestle with, Chopin also undertakes a

representation of cultural tensions between the north and the south, and even a small subplot regarding the fate of Fanny's adulterous friend, Lou Dawson.

There is little evidence that Thérèse Lafirme should be read as a stand-in for Kate Chopin; however, recognizing the similarities between their lives can be useful. When she set out to write *At Fault*, Chopin had been widowed for two years and though she'd successfully managed her deceased husband's business the author moved to St. Louis, in part because she had been having an affair with a married man, Albert Sampite. Sampite's wife did not file for a legal separation until September 1888, a few years after Chopin's departure from Louisiana. Though Sampite and Chopin's relationship did not follow exactly the same trajectory as that of Thérèse and Hosmer—the Sampite separation was dismissed nine weeks before the author began composing *At Fault*—one can plainly see why divorce might have been at the forefront of Chopin's mind when she sat down to write her novel (Toth 178-79). The merging of biographical fact and literary fiction is important to demonstrate the first difficult task that faced Chopin in writing this novel. Even as she had to develop a way in which to tell her story, she also had to determine a way to negotiate the difference between recounting her own experiences and providing a narrative that would captivate her readers. While the facts of Chopin's affair are certainly interesting on their own, in her novel we see the author grappling not just with her personal experience but with the issues of marriage, divorce, and sacrificing one's own desires in order to preserve one's own morality as they pertain to a larger argument about society.

Also, just as Thérèse Lafirme has a solid grasp on the management of Place-du-Bois, Kate Chopin was very actively engaged in charting the course of her own literary

career. After the manuscript for *At Fault* was rejected by a publisher, Chopin “impatient for literary recognition” had the novel printed at her own cost and then sent the text out to distributors, libraries, and newspaper editors (Toth 189). Chopin’s decision to self-publish certainly speaks to her confidence in the novel’s literary merit. The author’s faith in her work can’t be dismissed because such self-assuredness was not always characteristic. According to Emily Toth, Chopin began writing a novel titled *Young Dr. Gosse* approximately two weeks after completing *At Fault*. However, after Chopin attempted to publish her second novel for the better part of the 1890s, only to receive repeated rejections, she gave up and destroyed the manuscript (189). Though, as mentioned, critics have struggled to understand or build a case for the importance of reading this novel, perhaps Chopin’s willingness to use her own money in order to see *At Fault* printed is the best evidence of its merit to her oeuvre. Also, as Chopin remarked two years after the publication of her first novel, “the polishing up process has always proved disastrous to my work, and I avoid it, preferring the integrity of crudities to artificialities” (qtd. in Toth 206). It seems that Chopin was not a fan of perfect prose and preferred imperfections to the sterility of a well-edited piece, which certainly suggests that the flaws which trouble readers of *At Fault* are less the pure product of the author’s lack of skill and more likely the result of the novel being something of an experiment.

It should come as no surprise that in a novel concerned largely with divorce, marriage is a primary issue that complicates the lives of all the primary female characters. A positive function of the vast cast of female characters in *At Fault* is that Chopin can present an array of marriage experiences and the outcomes on women at various points in their lives. Since female characters range from the youthful Melicent, who has yet to

make up her mind about whom or whether she ought to marry, to the widowed Thérèse, with a broad spectrum of ladies included in between, what seems at first a crowded novel is really an exercise in thorough representation. In addition to presenting multiple views on marriage, Chopin might even be seen as experimenting with the way marriage is treated in multiple literary genres.

Though Chopin shows marriage to sometimes be difficult for women, *At Fault* cannot be read as making any sort of didactic argument in favor of women remaining single. In fact, it is established from early on that Thérèse wants nothing more than to be able to marry Hosmer. Also, the reader is never given the impression that her first marriage to Mr. Lafirme was anything but a positive experience. In fact, Thérèse's immense grief over her husband's death is described as resulting from her desire "to die with her Jérôme, feeling that life without him held nothing that could reconcile her to its further endurance" (5). Though the loss of her husband was deeply felt, Chopin makes it clear that once Thérèse comes to terms with his death and assumes control of the plantation, she is more than capable of being quite happy and successful. Thérèse then becomes the model of a woman who had been happily married and could happily be single, yet who would also gladly marry again were she to find a love that did not challenge her morals. Of course, the fact that Thérèse initially refuses to marry Hosmer complicates the argument a bit, though rather than rejecting him in order to focus on her life's work—as Perley Kelso does in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Silent Partner* (1871)—Thérèse refuses Hosmer because "there are some prejudices which a woman can't afford to part with ... even at the price of happiness" (36). Rather than rejecting the institution of marriage, Thérèse merely demands that it be entered into on her terms and

with a partner who meets all of her moral requirements. Thus Thérèse retains her independence by rejecting Hosmer's proposal, though any argument Chopin might be making about the constraints of marriage is lost when Thérèse is finally able and very happy to accept him. Because Hosmer is conveniently widowed before she marries him, Thérèse can acknowledge that choosing her morals over love was not a wise thing to do while still being able to procure a marriage to the man she loves.

Because her attitudes towards marriage seemingly shift as the novel progresses, Thérèse can't be read as adhering to any single generic attitude towards matrimony. The claim that she wished to die with rather than live without her first husband certainly possesses all the melodrama of a sentimental novel. Also, Thérèse's willingness to sacrifice her own happiness and the happiness of Hosmer by insisting that he return to Fanny because "a man owes to his manhood, to face the consequence of his own actions," is reminiscent of the sentimental self-sacrifice that William Dean Howells's satirized in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), a novel published five years prior to *At Fault* and which Chopin very likely read (39). The connection between *At Fault* and Howells's examination of divorce, *A Modern Instance* (1882), as well as the degree to which Chopin may have been responding to the arguments posited in that novel, have been well established by critics such as Jean Witherow, Donna Campbell, and Bernard Koloski. In addition to his influence on her content, Chopin refers to Howells's direct effect on her literary form in an 1890 letter to the *St. Louis Republic*. The letter is a response to a review of *At Fault* in which Chopin was criticized for her word choice and she defends herself by pointing out that Howells also used "depot" to "indicate a 'railway station'" and so she is "hardly ready to believe the value of *At Fault* marred by following

so safe a precedent” (201). Here Chopin is clearly aligning herself with the champion of American realism by noting the similarities in their diction, specifically their usage of common phrases, even though Thérèse’s idealization of her reasons for rejecting Hosmer feels reminiscent of a sentimental point of view.

Though the Thérèse-Hosmer-Fanny love triangle seems sentimental, Thérèse’s responses to and reflections upon love are really anything but. During a moment in which Thérèse is beginning to realize that she shares Hosmer’s feelings, Chopin writes:

Thérèse was a warm-hearted woman, and a woman of clear mental vision; a combination not found so often together as to make it ordinary. Being a woman of a warm heart, she had loved her husband with a devotion which good husbands deserve; but being a clear-headed woman, she was not disposed to rebel against the changes which Time bring, when so disposed, to the human sensibilities. She was not steeped in that agony of remorse which many might consider becoming in a widow of five years’ standing at the discovery that her heart, which had fitted well the holding of a treasure, was not narrowed to the holding of a memory,—the treasure being gone. (30)

This passage shows Thérèse to be a caring and feeling woman, but not one predisposed to excessive sentimentality. Though she loved her husband, Thérèse is practical enough to recognize that as time moves on a woman might again find love without betraying her first husband’s memory. Thus, while the quandary Thérèse faces seems, on the surface at least, to bear a striking resemblance to the love triangles mocked by Howells in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, it is different. In Howells’s novel Penelope Lapham must choose

between accepting Tom Corey's marriage proposal and hurting her sister's feelings. Thérèse, however, must choose between accepting Hosmer and preserving her own sense of integrity. Still both women must make a decision between a gesture of self-sacrifice and securing their own happiness. Ultimately, the primary difference is not their motivations but their choice. In Howells's novel Penelope is convinced to follow the advice of her parents and the Reverend Sewell who argues for an "economy of pain" which he claims would be the obvious choice "if we were not all perverted by traditions which are the figment of the shallowest sentimentality," so that only her sister will suffer rather than all three (241). Thérèse, of course, chooses self-sacrifice but any satisfaction she finds in that decision is undercut by the misery it causes Hosmer and Fanny. If Chopin is grappling with reconciling realism and sentimentalism then one has to wonder which side she ultimately chooses. When faced with a large decision Thérèse makes sentimental gestures but in her everyday life she is practical, pragmatic, and more prone to using reason than emotion when making decisions.

The unsentimental light which Chopin tried to shine on Thérèse can't be read as accidental, especially since the critique of sentimentalism is taken up elsewhere in the novel. During Fanny's first days at Place-du-Bois, she is described as avoiding the rain by staying indoors, beside the fire, "reading the latest novel of one of those prolific female writers who turn out their unwholesome intellectual sweets so tirelessly, to be devoured by the girls and women of the age" (78). That the author is criticizing this genre seems only abundantly clear, especially given that the novels are equated with candy, a female audience is specifically mentioned, and that these books are being read by Fanny, a character who the reader understands is not admirable, given her addiction to alcohol,

or remotely intellectual, given her intimate friendship with Belle Worthington, a woman who uses her own husband's books—philosophical works by Ruskin, Schopenhauer, and Emerson—to prop up wobbly table legs.³¹ Furthermore, Thérèse's own contrasting taste in texts is revealed when the Worthingtons visit Place-du-Bois on their way to Mardi Gras. Rather than socializing with the others, Mr. Worthington peruses Thérèse's "well-filled bookcase." The brief cataloguing of the Lafirme library reveals no popular novels at all; instead Balzac, Sir Walter Scott's Waverley Novels, Racine, Moliere, Bulwer and Shakespeare line the shelves (133). Though many of these books are described as older editions, suggesting that Thérèse did not purchase them herself, the catalogue nonetheless sets up a distinct difference between the two women's reading habits.

In addition to directly mentioning sentimental novels, the genre is also overtly criticized when Melicent receives the letter informing her of Grégoire's death. The narrator takes care to inform the reader that "she did not faint. The letter did not 'fall from her nerveless clasp.' She rather held it very steadily" (146). In this passage Chopin is clearly satirizing sentiment and doing her best to show that genre as unable to present a realistic view of women's actions. However, it has been clear throughout the novel that Melicent was never truly in love with Grégoire. Even after reading the letter and deciding that death transformed Grégoire into a more desirable figure than he'd been while breathing, Chopin seems to be lightly mocking Melicent's reaction when she writes, "Was she in love with Grégoire now that he was dead? Perhaps. At all events, for the next month, Melicent would not be bored" (147). Although the girl's reaction to the letter

³¹ Of course, Chopin's characterization of the sentimental novel also mirrors Howells's critique of the fictional novel, "*Tears, Idle Tears*" which several characters have read or are reading in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. That book is directly criticized and mocked when a character humorously suggests that it ought to be renamed "*Slop, Silly Slop*" (197).

is not the stuff of sentimental fiction, her decision to mourn him despite the gesture's insincerity is still seen as amusing. Perhaps Chopin wished to make the point that sentimental tropes were rather silly when compared with realism but that realism too contained the possibility for humor, especially when romance was involved.

Given Chopin's willingness to satirize sentimentalism while seemingly carving out a space where realism allows for women to still possess a romanticized view of the world on occasion, it surely seems that Thérèse is not meant to be read as an entirely sentimental heroine, despite her willingness to sacrifice her happiness. However, if that is the case, then the novel's conclusion is puzzling at best. The second half of the book is devoted to showing the ways in which lives and relationships fall apart when individuals and society are at odds, however, Thérèse is, to a degree, rewarded for adhering to her "prejudices." Because Fanny dies in an accident, Hosmer is conveniently transformed from an unacceptable marriage partner to an acceptable one. However, Thérèse does not respond to this transformation in an unemotional or unsentimental manner. Rather than echoing anything like the pragmatism which characterized her meditations on the question of remarrying, the novel's conclusion depicts Thérèse as a woman so in disbelief of her good fortune that "her hands were clasped as if in prayer" (166). The novel's final chapter is, indeed, so glutted with sentimental imagery that it is worth including the following paragraph in its entirety, if only to show the lengths to which the author goes in describing Hosmer and Thérèse's newly-wedded bliss. Chopin writes:

But of the opinions, favorable or other, that were being exchanged regarding them and their marriage, Hosmer and Thérèse heard little and would have cared less, so absorbed were they in the overmastering

happiness that was holding them in thralldom. They could not yet bring themselves to look at it calmly—this happiness. Even the intoxication of it seemed a thing that promised to hold. Through love they had sought each other, and now the fulfillment of that love had brought more than tenfold its promise to both. It was a royal love; a generous love and a rich one in its revelation. It was a magician that had touched life for them and changed it into a glory. In giving them to each other, it was moving them to the fullness of their own capabilities. Much to do in two little months; but what cannot love do? (166)

If this scene is taken at face value the reader is left wondering exactly what happened. Has Chopin given up her critique of sentimentalism at the very end of her novel so as to provide her reader with the satisfaction of a happy ending? Possibly. Given that this was Chopin's first novel it's not entirely unreasonable to suggest that she might have lost her nerve and wanted to reign in her critique of sentiment just a bit so as to leave her readers pleased. It's also possible that the extreme sentimentality of this passage is evidence of Chopin's satirizing sentiment to the last. It seems likely that Chopin thought readers would expect Thérèse and Hosmer to be rewarded for their efforts by marriage, yet was unable to present the scene without a bit of irony. Or, even more simply, perhaps Chopin believed in a version of love that was not entirely dependent upon societal rules.

In *The Descent of Love* (1996), Bert Bender argues that *At Fault* shows evidence of Chopin experimenting “with the ideas of sexual selection in an artless and amateurish way” (199). The criticism in that observation stems from what Bender identifies as Chopin's optimism regarding romantic human relationships, despite her interest in the

writings of Charles Darwin. Bender also suggests that Chopin was not willing to fully accept Darwin's view of women's role in sexual selection as a passive one that was not also driven by desire (198). Though readers certainly might criticize Chopin's treatment of race in *At Fault*—as Bender and others do—her treatment of attraction is not necessarily artless or amateurish.³² Rather than simply bumbling along, it seems that Chopin was very intently working on developing an idea of romance that could capture the indescribable or magical aspect of emotion as it's been socially viewed, while also acknowledging it as a primal instinct not to be controlled by social constructs. The relationship between Chopin's vision of romantic love and her need to reconcile it with Darwinian views of evolution is made clear in the January 16, 1898 edition of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, where Kate Chopin, Mrs. Tudor F. Brooks and Mrs. Shreve Carter, “three ladies well known in St. Louis society,” were asked to answer the very pressing question, “Is love divine?” (218). In response to the prompt, Kate Chopin wrote:

I am inclined to think that love springs from animal instinct, and therefore is, in a measure, divine. One can never resolve to love ... unless one feels irresistibly drawn by an indefinable current of magnetism. ... I am sure we all feel that love—true, pure love, is an uncontrollable emotion that allows of no analyzation and no vivisection” (219-20).

Though this brief newspaper essay was written almost a decade after *At Fault*, it contains echoes of the attitude towards romantic love also shown in the novel. When Hosmer declares his feelings for Thérèse very similar imagery is used to describe how her hand

³² Bender does not go so far as to call Chopin a racist, seeing her treatment of race instead as a product of the time period; however, he points out that Darwin's theories were often used to justify racism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He also draws attention to the degree to which Chopin romanticizes her non-white characters such as Morico as more in touch with “a primordial wisdom” (200).

“acted like a charged electric battery” when placed into his (31). Likening attraction to electricity as a means of demonstrating its innate power, in addition to the preceding discussion of Chopin’s views of sentimentalism, suggests that Chopin did not intend for the reader to see Thérèse’s rejection of Hosmer as heroic. Instead, her decision is unnatural because she chooses to preserve her integrity, a set of values influenced by society, rather than opting to base her decision upon the biological fact of her physical attraction.

Given this line of reasoning, however, it seems at first that Chopin left a rather loose end in the form of Hosmer’s failed marriage to Fanny. Hosmer’s initial attraction to Fanny, like his magnetic attraction to Thérèse, was based more upon instinct than any knowledge of her character or rational thought. As if to explain the match’s being destined to fail, Hosmer says, “She was a pretty little thing, not more than twenty, all pink and white and merry blue eyes and stylish clothes. Whatever it was, there was something about her that kept me at her side all day. Every word and movement of hers had an exaggerated importance for me” (37). Though Hosmer is attempting to make a case for his marriage failing due to his and Fanny not really knowing each other, Chopin’s interest in the magnetism of attraction would seemingly make this marriage destined to succeed. While this inconsistency can certainly be read as a flaw in the novel, what the author may be attempting to demonstrate is that nature can make mistakes if the parties involved are not biologically sound. Fanny is ultimately not a suitable wife for Hosmer because she is biologically flawed. Though it seems rather harsh to suggest, perhaps the death of their son is meant to gesture towards Fanny’s inability to produce viable offspring. Also, her very physical addiction to alcohol renders Fanny incapable of

being a good spouse. Finally, Chopin very clearly distinguishes Fanny as physically inferior to Thérèse. With Fanny “there was no guessing what her figure might be, it was disguised under a very fashionable dress” (50). Thérèse, on the other hand, is much more clearly attractive and in possession of “a roundness of figure,” which suggests health (7). That Fanny conceals her body with “stylish clothes” and “fashionable dress” may account for Hosmer’s misinterpreting their compatibility. So while Chopin may be experimenting with portraying romance as motivated by biology rather than society, she also takes into account the negative impact social customs can have upon the appropriate interpretation of behavior. Just as Thérèse allows morality to interfere with her biological processes, so does Fanny misrepresent her biological compatibility to Hosmer, albeit perhaps unintentionally for we’ve no evidence that she intentionally utilized fashion as a means to lure in Hosmer, by altering her appearance through clothing and perhaps makeup.

When Thérèse encounters Hosmer again on the train, just prior to their marriage, she acknowledges that she was “at fault” for choosing her beliefs, what Hosmer refers to as “the dead letter” rather than “the living spirit” (165). By acknowledging this mistake, Thérèse is able to have her happily-ever-after with Hosmer. The conclusion we might reach then regarding the over-the-top sentimentalism of *At Fault*’s ending is that Chopin doesn’t want to reward Thérèse’s adherence to her morality; instead she wishes to show what good can come of choosing to follow instinct or emotion rather than social code. That the emotions which compel Thérèse’s growth are entangled with the overly sentimental emotions Chopin wishes readers to avoid seems, in truth, more the evidence of realism than sentimentalism. That said, while novels such as Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham* do have a happy outcome—Penelope and Tom marry, Silas and his wife

retire to the family farm, bankrupt but happy—the prose in that work is not steeped in sentiment like Chopin’s. While a reader could certainly see the disconnect between philosophy and practice in *At Fault* as evidence of amateurish writing, given this essay’s earlier suggestion that we consider the genres of the novel to be creoles, much in the same way foreign languages put into conversations create new modes of communication, so might we consider this novel to be an experiment in creating a more emotive realism. That is, Chopin clearly wishes to represent things as they are; however, it seems important that unseen aspects of behavior such as emotion and instinct not be omitted as casualties. Though Mary Papke argues that *At Fault* ought to be read as a “woman’s work that straddles in unladylike fashion the gap between sentimental and social fiction” a closer look at the image she creates seems to justify the assertion that the novel participates in two genres simultaneously (42). In order to straddle the generic divide Papke suggests, a foot must be placed in either. Rather than reading *At Fault* as struggling to keep its balance, perhaps we should see the “gap” as more of a fault line or a fissure from which a new genre can emerge.

Of course, in addition to reading this novel as participating in a fusion of realism and sentimentalism, the mere mention of Darwinian theories—not to mention deaths that involve gambling and alcoholism—immediately causes one to consider the possibility that *At Fault* be read as an example of literary naturalism. Often characterized by an interest in biological determinism and chance, naturalism’s tenets were well-articulated in Emile Zola’s essay *The Experimental Novel* (1880). However, Chopin expressed distaste for Zola who she felt “takes life too clumsily and seriously” in his writing (qtd. in Toth 244). That Chopin resisted other naturalist writers such as Thomas Hardy for being too

didactic in their approach certainly suggests that she did not actively attempt to write a novel of that genre. Of course, as discussed, Chopin was also not a fan of sentimentalism and yet that too found a way to creep into her narrative. The inclusion of naturalist tropes certainly does not overwhelm *At Fault*, when included they are flawed and not fully developed depictions, rather than classic representations of that genre. However these instances appear to stem from the author's efforts to wrestle with regionalism. Much in the same way Chopin's use of sentimentalism and realism informed the Thérèse/Hosmer storyline so does the friction between naturalism and regionalism, or local color, become apparent in the Grégoire/Melicent storyline, as well as in the events surrounding Joçint's and Fanny's deaths.

Because of her alcoholism, Fanny seems at first to be perhaps the most purely naturalistic character. Given this, an exploration of her character might seem an excellent place to begin searching for the etymology of Chopin's naturalism. However, in truth, Fanny cannot be read as a naturalist character or a local color character because the novel's depiction of her addiction does not draw upon any sort of biological argument and Chopin does not clearly identify her character with any specific geographical region. Though she is associated with St. Louis, there is no indication as to where she originally came from and only her friends there, never her family, are mentioned. However, despite her drinking, there is little in Chopin's text that establishes Fanny as naturalistic. No mention is made of heredity as responsible for her addiction and the few comments which do address Fanny's innate characteristics merely suggest that she has a weak will. One of the few passages that suggest we entertain the idea of reading Fanny as representative of an experiment with naturalism occurs very on when Hosmer is describing his failed

marriage for Thérèse. He recalls coming home one evening with Melicent and how Fanny “looked at us wildly” (38). The animalistic description of Fanny certainly seems to gesture towards naturalism; however, it also needs to be noted that this characterization comes from Hosmer who has a clear motive for making his ex-wife appear as inhuman as possible. Conveniently, the second depiction of Fanny as more animal than human also comes from Hosmer and takes place just before she meets her untimely end in the river. When Hosmer is out searching for Fanny in the rain he reflects that, “he could not rid himself of the haunting dread of having wounded her nature cruelly. He felt much as a man who in a moment of anger inflicts an irreparable hurt upon some small, weak, irresponsible creature” (153). The likening of naturalist characters to tiny creatures is a common trope in a genre where authors are encouraged to consider their subjects as viewed through a microscope. Yet, Hosmer’s likening Fanny to a “small creature” seems barely enough to argue for Chopin embracing naturalism. Because so little credit is given to any innate characteristics, it is difficult to read Fanny as a naturalist character. Instead she seems to be more likely a representative for social issues than biological determinism, thus rendering her character a better argument for *At Fault* as social-problem fiction than naturalism.

In an essay that examines *At Fault* as an example of regional writing, Pamela Menke argues that “Fanny and Grégoire reside at the turbulent fringes of the narrative” and that they “fall prey to their maladaptive behaviors” (5). For her these characters exist to demonstrate flaws so that the novel can advance arguments in favor of social progress. However, Thérèse’s nephew is a better example of a character that can be viewed as representative of Chopin’s efforts to fuse naturalism and regionalism, or at least in which

to work out the problems in both genres. The son of a Creole father and a French mother, Grégoire speaks in a southern dialect that Chopin renders very carefully so as to clearly associate him with the locale of his origins. Though Grégoire's speech patterns make him a clear candidate for a regionalist novel, they are looked down upon by Melicent. Though she admits to herself that his "short-comings of language...seemed not to detract from a definite inheritance of good breeding," in fact they've become endearing and "touched his personality as a physical deformation might," Melicent cannot seriously entertain the idea "that she should marry a man whose eccentricity of speech would certainly not adapt itself to the requirements of polite society" (44). Because speech patterns are not hereditary, Melicent can entertain the idea of choosing a lover who may not at first appear her social equal. However, the assessment of Grégoire's speech as unable to adapt to society translates it into an almost biological characteristic and reveals Melicent's regional bias. Just as Fanny was reduced to an animalistic state by Hosmer's characterization, so is Grégoire reduced to little more than a regional stereotype by Melicent's. Though Grégoire's use regional dialect is the first aspect of his personality to repel Melicent, his "peculiarities of speech" alone are not responsible for her final decision to leave Place-du-Bois and him behind.

The tragedy which unravels around Grégoire and Joçint in the second part of the novel reveals both men to be characters largely out of their element. When the reader first encounters Joçint he is working at the mill, performing mind-numbingly repetitive tasks "with his heart in the pine hills and knowing that his little Creole pony was roaming the woods in vicious idleness and his rifle gathering an unsightly ruse on the cabin wall at home" (13). Thus Joçint is established as a character more at home in nature than in the

industrialized setting of the mill. This point is especially driven home when we learn that he views Thérèse as “one upon whom partly rested the fault of this intrusive Industry which had come to fire the souls of indolent fathers with a greedy ambition for gain, at the sore expense of revolting youth” (13). Never depicted as comfortable indoors—even in his father’s home Joçint seems desperate to escape—the reader is given to understand that the Native American blood Joçint inherited from his mother has rendered him ill-suited to live spent in the tedium of working at the mill.

Similarly, Grégoire is depicted as a character who has adjusted to life on the plantation but who has a history of preferring places where he can “raise Cain” (45). Despite his habit of gambling, drinking, and causing trouble—traits that he seems to share with his briefly mentioned brothers—Grégoire, like Fanny, appears less of a naturalistic character upon closer examination and more an example of a regional stereotype. Though his love for Melicent is described as resulting from his “undisciplined desires and hot-blooded eagerness,” Grégoire is also like Fanny in that it takes an outside observer to really suggest that he is more animal than human (80). In the days following Grégoire’s murder of Joçint, the native inhabitants of the area seem to wrestle with the act of violence much less than the outsiders, Hosmer and Melicent. Taking for granted that Grégoire didn’t do anything that exceeding what was called for, the locals are willing to let the incident go. Melicent, however, informs Thérèse that Grégoire has become horrible in her eyes. Given that Melicent is prone to petty dramas and that the reader has seen all along how she toyed with Grégoire’s emotions when she had no sincere intention of entangling herself romantically, this condemnation does not count for much. Hosmer,

on the other hand, contemplates Grégoire's actions in a very clinical and detached manner:

Heredity and pathology had to be considered in relation with the slayer's character. He saw in it one of those interesting problems of human existence that are ever turning up for man's contemplation, but hardly for the exercise of man's individual judgment. He was conscious of an inward repulsion which this action of Grégoire's awakened in him,—much the same as a feeling of disgust for an animal whose instinct drives it to the doing of violent deeds... (108)

While the community is able to see past Grégoire's actions, the outsider as personified by Hosmer cannot. The differences in their reactions seem to suggest that perhaps Chopin finds there to be tension between regionalism and naturalism. A regionalist character might be excused for his behavior due to his possessing a vested interest in the larger needs of the society, whereas to view Grégoire in a naturalistic light is to render him an animal, a point of view that can only be possessed by an outside observer who is detached enough to separate the individual from his actions. It is also interesting, given Chopin's professed dislike of Zola and Hardy, that the author chooses to attribute the judgmental eye of naturalism to a male observer. Unlike Hosmer, Thérèse is able to feel sympathy for all three of the potentially naturalist characters: Fanny, Joçint, and Grégoire.

In the case of Grégoire it is also important to note that his death is ultimately not motivated by heredity. Though he does drink, there is no suggestion that he is an alcoholic like Fanny. Instead, Grégoire's demise is really brought about by his grief over

having lost Melicent. Had she not left Place-du-Bois feigning disgust but also because she'd grown tired of him and wanted to seek out new amusements, there is nothing to suggest that Grégoire would have gone off and gotten himself killed in a card game. That he is motivated more by love than nature even clearly demonstrates that Grégoire and Thérèse do have much in common.

The tension that Chopin identifies between naturalism and regionalism manifests itself in her rendering characters that are not entirely sympathetic—all three of them are guilty of behavior that is certainly not commendable, and in the cases of Grégoire and Joçint, downright destructive; however, none of them is entirely unsympathetic, either. Like Thérèse, the reader cannot help but feel pity for Grégoire and Joçint, both men who die because they are unable to adapt to the society around them. As for Fanny, one of Chopin's early reviewers for the *Natchitoches Enterprise* found that character so sympathetic that she was mistaken for the novel's heroine. The author responded to the review on 9 December 1890, writing: "I ask to straighten this misconception—of Fanny having been "at fault," because it is one, which if accepted by the reader is liable to throw the story out of perspective" (202). Thus, even though Hosmer attempts to portray these very flawed characters as animals, both the author and her heroine resist the characterization, instead emphasizing the role of environment. The emphasis on region rather than heredity, despite the inclusion of some clearly Darwinian ideas, suggests that, as she did with sentimentalism and realism, Chopin is doing her best to locate a middle ground where characters can be animalistic in their behavior but human in their motivations.

As mentioned earlier, contemporary literary scholars have spent comparatively much less time studying *At Fault* than has been spent on *The Awakening*. Yet, many of the more recently published studies of *At Fault* do attempt to make some claim as to how we might classify it in terms of genre. These studies seem largely to attempt at making some sense of how Chopin's novel relates to her other work and to the work of her peers. Perhaps in trying to map out how Chopin is aligning herself in terms of literary movements readers hope to make some sense of what is an admittedly complex and not always easily explained novel. Though *At Fault* was not widely distributed, due Chopin's having published it herself, it was reviewed in seven publications, most of which were located near St. Louis or New Orleans. Even those early reviewers, in their attempt to interpret the novel for their readers, attempt to make some sort of generic classification—albeit without employing the scholarly terms familiar to us today. The general consensus in these reviews is that Chopin is an excellent practitioner of sentimental and regional fiction. A review printed in the *St. Louis Republic* in 1890 described *At Fault* as “a clever romance of Louisiana life” (166). Another review, printed in *Saint Louis Life*, claimed that the author “brings before the mental vision of the readers pictures of places and persons that at once strike us as true to life” (169). It is likely that because she was a female author, reviewers were not inclined to consider her novel as participating in any genres except those which were widely associated with female writers. Though their reviews are positive, Chopin's early critics were limited by their perception of what constituted women's writing.

Fortunately, due to the efforts of scholars in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, it is apparent that Chopin herself was not limited by such narrow

categorization. Rather than producing a novel limited by readers' expectations, the author willingly experimented with genres that were more associated with male writers. Rather than producing a purely feminine version of realism or naturalism, Chopin attempted to craft her novel so as not to exclude any possibility. Admittedly, in attempting to find her own literary voice Chopin may have written a novel that is not easily categorized or understood, that is sometimes messy and convoluted. However, a careful reading of *At Fault* reveals that Kate Chopin is clearly developing a language of her own which will help her to tell the stories she needs to tell.

CHAPTER FOUR

“It’s better to watch”: Compulsive Voyeurism and the Progression of Whartonian Naturalism in *The House of Mirth and Custom of the Country*

Nevertheless, no picture of myself would be more than a profile if it failed to give some account of the teeming visions which, ever since my small-childhood, and even at the busiest and most agitated periods of my outward life, have incessantly peopled my inner world.

—Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*

No Edith Wharton heroine has captured readers’ sympathy quite like the very tragic Lily Bart of *The House of Mirth* (1905). Though she is remarkably beautiful, Lily Bart is ultimately unable to secure a marriage that will grant her financial stability and security. Wharton’s novel traces the young woman’s descent from a privileged pedestal in society’s upper echelon to her lonely death-by-overdose in a boardinghouse. Critics and Wharton scholars, both when the novel was published and today, are often inclined to discuss the novel’s staggering popularity and posit arguments as to why readers were so taken with what is arguably one of the most tragic tales Wharton ever told.³³ In searching to explain Lily Bart’s popularity, one is tempted to echo Edgar Allan Poe’s sentiment that perhaps the most poetic topic available to writers is the death of a beautiful woman.³⁴ Conversely, no Edith Wharton heroine has elicited readers’ antipathy quite like the very selfish Undine Spragg of *The Custom of the Country* (1913). Though she too is remarkably beautiful, Undine Spragg is ultimately unable to secure a marriage that will

³³ As Amy L. Blair notes, *The House of Mirth* sold 100,000 in the first two months of publication (149).

³⁴ “Philosophy of Composition,” *Graham’s Magazine* 1846. Like many of Poe’s writings, it’s difficult to ascertain whether this sentiment was genuine or meant to be read as satirical.

completely fulfill her seemingly endless desire for increased financial security and upward social mobility. Never satisfied with her current position, Undine's climb through society's ranks is both swift and ruthless. While readers may follow Lily's decline with trepidation, they observe Undine's ascent through the social ranks with dismay and repulsion. In both cases, however, one is compelled to keep watching.

Lily Bart and Undine Spragg are, in many ways, opposite sides of the same lovely coin. While the former "might be incapable of marrying for money" the latter has no qualms about trading marital vows for fortunes or family titles (128). Just as their values regarding marriage and love are markedly different, so are the trajectories each woman's life follows. Even more quickly than Lily plummets from her high place in society, Undine rises from the ranks of the nouveau riche to the aristocracy. Though these characters seemingly have little in common besides being physically attractive and part of an elite social circle—the differences in their upbringings, relationships to society, and the morality to which each woman subscribes or, in Undine's case, does not subscribe, will be discussed in greater detail later in this essay—both Lily and Undine rely upon the visual perception of others for approval and, in many cases, appraisal. Even the language of this essay's epigraph, a brief passage from Wharton's autobiography *A Backward Glance* (1934), in which she refers to the characters who populate her imagination as "visions" suggests the significance of sight in her literary works. That these characters are imagine images in the author's mind even before they take shape upon the written page foreshadows the importance their appearances will have throughout the course of each narrative.

In her autobiography, however, Wharton did not limit herself to discussing the larger scope of her creative process. In addition she reflected upon the challenges she faced while writing specific texts such as *The House of Mirth*. Wharton explains that she encountered some difficulty in constructing a tragedy based upon New York society. Though her novel was set in the lavish world of the upper class, the glamour of that world had to be reconciled with the misfortunes it was capable of inflicting upon Lily Bart. For Wharton, Lily needed to be not merely a tragic heroine but an emblem of the tragedy that could take place both in and because of the upper class. On the significance of Lily's situation, Wharton wrote:

In what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have, on the "old woe of the world," any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess? The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart. (*A Backward Glance* 207)

Thus we can see that Wharton intended for Lily to represent all that was corrupt and corrosive about high society because she was the beautiful thing which it had destroyed. Though Lily is at times portrayed as a bit shallow, she does operate under a moral code that keeps her from engaging in debasing acts, such as trading sexual favors for monetary or social gain, or debasing others through her actions, such as using information in her possession to blackmail others whose help she could certainly use. Furthermore, Lily is conscientious when it comes to repaying her debts and helping her friends. Rather than

constructing Lily as a corrupt example of society's worst possible habit, Wharton victimizes Lily so as to draw attention to those destructive tendencies.

Though some readers did understand that *The House of Mirth* was meant as a critique of society rather than the indictment of an individual, they did not necessarily appreciate the delivery of this message. A review published in the *Independent* on 20 July 1905 compliments Wharton's ability to render New York society, a source it likens to a "cesspool of vice," but criticizes her for simply depicting that group's destruction of Lily—a tragedy the reviewer sees as all the greater because "the destroying of a woman means the passing of a finer spiritual nature" (109). The reviewer goes on to argue that Wharton's novel would have been more of a success—ostensibly in the reviewer's opinion, not in regard to sales figures—if the author had allowed Lily to serve as a good example by finding a way out of her bleak situation. This sentiment is restated again in the *Independent's* "Review of the Important Books of the Year" when the reviewer describes the "the flaw in Mrs. Wharton's splendid sermon" as her forgetting that "people rise quicker to a hope...a warning is like giving a stone when they ask for bread" (113-14). Though Wharton certainly meant for readers to be touched by Lily's sad fate and to read her death as a tragedy, there is little evidence that she intended to deliver a sermon or provide a moral lesson. Quite the opposite, in a 1905 letter to her publisher, William Crary Brownell, Wharton informs him that she has removed the title-page quotation from the novel's pre-publication proofs because "it inculcates a moral" (94).³⁵ While Wharton

³⁵ The excised quotation was "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth" (*Ecclesiastes* 7:4). Though Wharton did not want the Biblical quotation to precede the story of Lily Bart, a similar one had appeared on the title page of *The Valley of Decision*: "Multitudes and multitudes in the valley of decision" (*Joel* 3:14). In the same letter to Brownell, Wharton says that she agreed to the latter quotation because it merely "'constated' a fact" (94).

clearly intended to illustrate the negative capability of society, as stated in her explanation of Lily's tragic significance, there is little evidence in the novel or in Wharton's personal papers that suggests she meant for *The House of Mirth* to be didactic. In many ways, the most tragic aspect of Wharton's novel is that the reader can foresee the approaching tragedies while the characters remain blissfully unaware of the destruction they are wrecking through their social maneuverings and manipulations.

While relying on Wharton's biographical reflections is certainly a useful and illuminating way to understand the context and intent of her literary endeavors, it can be helpful to draw on other sources also, such as the insights of her contemporaries and friends. Such is the case with *The Custom of the Country*, particularly since many mentions of this novel are anything but glowing. Wharton's tale of business and divorce, social isolation and social climbing, material greed and narcissism, is not always effusively lauded as a great literary achievement. In "A Tribute to Edith Wharton," Pulitzer Prize-winning author Louis Bromfield wistfully recalls conversations between himself and the author regarding the proper cultivation of dahlias, sweet peas, and petunias.³⁶ Buried amidst charming gardening anecdotes Bromfield refers to himself as a man of the frontier, an upbringing he sees as a sharp contrast to Wharton's deep roots in the tightly-sealed sphere of Washington Park. Bromfield goes on to assure the reader that the difference in their origins had no bearing on the depth of their friendship. But, despite Bromfield's denial of any negative influences stemming from disparities between his and Wharton's backgrounds, he goes on to accusingly point out that his frontier heritage was

³⁶ According to Daniel Bratton, Louis Bromfield and Edith Wharton seem to have first become acquainted in 1931. Louis Bromfield won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *Early Autumn* (1926).

“derided so bitterly in *The Custom of the Country*” (109). Bromfield’s bruises are further made evident in his assertive speculation that Wharton’s 1913 novel was “the only book of which she [was], I think, a little uneasy toward the end of her life” (116-17). The degree to which Wharton may or may not have been “uneasy” about *The Custom of the Country* is difficult to ascertain, however, Bromfield certainly seems to have been. As he does not provide specific examples of this derision or any specific evidence to support his claim regarding Wharton’s supposed misgivings, one can guess that Bromfield simply did not care for Wharton’s characterization of individuals from “the frontier” and may be recalling the moment a bit creatively.

In Shari Benstock’s *No Gifts from Chance*, she too points to discomfort caused by *Custom of the Country*. Benstock cites a passage in the autobiography of art historian Kenneth Clark, where he muses over the circumstances which might have cost Edith Wharton the Nobel Prize in 1927. Clark claimed that the Swedish committee believed the 1913 novel was “too cynical.” Though Benstock does not elaborate on the specific aspects of the novel which were offensive to the Nobel selection group and Clark does not seem as personally touched as Bromfield, cynicism does indeed run rampant as the reader watches the progression of a heroine without conscience (386).

The argument for Edith Wharton as an author of literary naturalism; a participant in the deterministic genre also written by Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser, has been well made by other scholars both in explicit studies of the author’s specific writings and in more broadly-focused essays about women writers of naturalism. An early assessment of Wharton’s literary naturalism in *The House of Mirth* is often located in Blake Nevius’s claim that Lily Bart is “as completely and typically the product

of her heredity, environment and the historical moment which found American materialism in the ascendant as the protagonist of any recognized naturalistic novel.” Nevius further describes the novel as akin to something Dreiser would write, only not quite as depressing, before going on to argue that “Edith Wharton never rode determinism as a thesis” and suggesting that her naturalism is merely a convenient outlet for “a personal mood of despair” (57-58).³⁷ Though Nevius locates naturalism in *The House of Mirth* that observation is not extended to *The Custom of the Country*, a novel he reads as a merging the picaresque and the novel of manners for comic effect (159). Larry Rubin’s 1957 essay, however, carefully examines *The House of Mirth*, *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), *The Custom of the Country*, and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), to “trace certain broad aspects of naturalism as they are manifested in specific situations” (182). More recently, Donald Pizer examines Wharton’s adherence to a less strictly conventional, or environmentally deterministic, form of literary naturalism; while Barbara Hochman studies how the inclusion of books and reading in the naturalist novels of Wharton and authors such as Frank Norris and Stephen Crane suggests the authors’ attempts to secure their positions in the hierarchy of culture. Other critics such as Donna Campbell and Jennifer Fleissner posit arguments for naturalism as a genre in which Edith Wharton could explore ideas about women’s bodies and sexuality.

Since so many scholars have laid a solid foundation for reading Wharton as a naturalist, rather than simply argue that *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the*

³⁷ As Larry Rubin notes, even prior to Nevius’s 1953 observation, critics such as P. H. Boynton (“American Authors of Today,” *English Journal* 12.30 [Jan. 1923]), Robert Morss Lovett (*Edith Wharton*. New York: R. M. McBride & Co., 1925), and Nellie Elizabeth Monroe (*The Novel and Society: A Critical Study of the Modern Novel*. Chapel Hill: Univ. North Carolina Press, 1941) comment upon the role of heredity and environment in shaping Lily Bart’s tragic end, though they do not delve deeply into a study of Wharton as a naturalist writer.

Country should be read as participating in that genre, this essay will examine the ways that Wharton's depictions of the heroines' relationships to vision and visuality demonstrate evolution in her employment of naturalism. So much of Lily Bart's and Undine Spragg's success depends upon appearances and their being seen—in the right places, in the right way, and by the right people—that looking closely at that aspect of the novel enables us to understand why the latter character should be read as a direct descendant of the former. In addition to understanding how visuality plays an important role in each character's development, this essay will examine the ways in which each protagonist suggests a different way of understanding the importance of appearances. By employing multiple references to sight and seeing, Wharton implicates the reader as participating in the culture which both destroys Lily and fosters Undine. The final outcome of readers spending so much time taking in conspicuous displays of wealth and luxury is a degree of compulsive voyeurism and the construction of status-based pornography. With Lily Bart we cannot stop watching to see if she will be saved and with Undine Spragg we keep watching to see who she will destroy. In either case, no one—not the reader and certainly not the other characters that populate these novels—can look away, even for a moment.

An understanding of both compulsion and voyeurism is certainly critical to this study of Wharton's novels. In *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, Jennifer Fleissner defines compulsive activities not merely as repetitive and irresistible actions but as acts that create “a seemingly endless spiral.” Fleissner goes on to point out that turn of the century psychological writings viewed compulsivity as a “*dialectical* process” where any attempt at perfecting order ultimately disrupts and undermines one's attempts, resulting in a

breakdown of structures. In a passage that is crucial to this essay, Fleissner refers specifically to Pierre Janet's identification of the primary symptom of compulsion as a "feeling of incompleteness" (10, emphasis in original). Thus the compulsive act is compelled by a sense of lacking that the individual struggles to fill. However, rather than meeting the needs of the individual, this struggle for fulfillment only impairs one's ability to create the order necessary for contentment. Compulsion then is never satisfied and only leaves one wanting more, thus perpetuating itself indefinitely.

Certainly, both Lily and Undine display compulsive behaviors. In Lily's case, compulsion is demonstrated by her addiction to self-destructive behaviors such as gambling and drug use. Though her addictions increase in seriousness, these detrimental patterns begin to reveal themselves very early in the novel. In chapter three, Lily retires to her room at the Trenor's estate, Bellomont, only to realize that she has lost an immense sum of money, three hundred dollars, in a single evening of playing bridge. The language that describes Lily's relationship to gambling clearly establishes it as a pattern of behavior rather than a lone occurrence:

And since she had played regularly the passion had grown on her. Once or twice of late she had won a large sum, and instead of keeping it against future losses, had spent it in dress or jewelry; and the desire to atone for this imprudence, combined with the increasing exhilaration of the game, drove her to risk higher stakes at each fresh venture. She tried to excuse herself on the plea that, in the Trenor set, if one played at all one must either play high or be set down as priggish or stingy; but she knew that the

gambling passion was upon her, and that in her present surroundings there was small hope of resisting it. (24)

This scene demonstrates the compulsion of Lily's behavior because her gambling is clearly motivated by a sense of financial lacking that is only further perpetuated by monetary losses. In an attempt to earn more money so as to keep up with her social set, Lily gambles what little she does have, only to find herself deeper in debt. Though Lily does hope to win money, she does not pin too many of her hopes on it. Instead, the greater value is ascribed to the social capital she gains by playing. Even more harmful than the gambling, however, is Lily's inability to recognize her participation in behavior that is so dangerous to her general well-being. Lily's lack of self-awareness is made clear when she refuses to ring for a maid after her loss, deciding that they are both in similar situations "in bondage to other people's pleasure" (24). Though there is a social expectation that Lily participate in the card games of her hosts, she assumes no responsibility for her actions which certainly suggests that we read her as a more typical type of naturalist character—at the mercy of her environment. This reading is reinforced by the last line of the above passage in which Lily realizes that any hope of resisting her addiction was rendered futile in her social environment. While Lily may at least recognize the social structures responsible for her compulsive behavior, the fact that she assumes no ability to affect or change those circumstances clearly indicates her to be a character that will be shaped by the forces that surround her.

Shortly after Lily's losses at the card table, her habit escalates from gambling at the bridge table to speculating in the stock market with help from Judy Trenor's husband, Gus. Rather than dealing with multiples of a hundred, Lily confidently risks much more

because Gus Trenor assures her that she will certainly profit from another “big rise” (69). However, what Lily doesn’t realize is that her friend’s husband finds her sexually attractive and has been using his own money to fund her investments and provide her dividends. Of course, this once again places Lily in the unfortunate position of accumulating a debt which she cannot afford to pay. This situation, much like Lily’s addiction to gambling at cards, reveals her to be drawn to the acquisition of money without any real knowledge or understanding of finances. In fact, each time her interactions with Trenor are mentioned, the reader is informed that Lily has only the vaguest comprehension of her situation and the manner in which her money is being earned or lost. Rather than attempting to understand financial matters, Lily displays her naïveté by trusting Gus Trenor and never questioning his motives. Just as Lily was unaware of her own complicity in her gambling addiction, here she appears unaware of the circumstances surrounding her speculation in the stock market. However, Lily does “vaguely suppose” the circumstances of her exchanges with Gus but opts not to think too hard or examine her situation too closely (69). Though she is capable of reflecting, especially given what she knows about Carry Fisher and her “investments” with Gus, she refuses. Lily’s lack of conscious, self-reflective engagement with her compulsive behavior causes it to seem even more the result of impulse, in turn reinforcing the idea that she can be read as a typical naturalist character.

In addition to making money, Lily is also shown to be a compulsive spender. We are told that “Lily had seen money go out as quickly as it came in” and she certainly preferred “the amusement of spending it” to the prudence of setting some aside (87). In addition to portraying Lily as an individual driven by impulse rather than intellect, her

constant material consumption has an interesting impact upon the reader. The inclination to fritter away her funds on dresses, jewelry, and other essentially disposable goods is so compulsive that the reader begins to find these items distasteful because of the economic ruin they foreshadow. Because it was published so early in the twentieth century, readers of Wharton's novel might have still been conditioned by the standard tropes of Victorian literature to understand that the accrual of debt typically signaled the inevitability of poverty and ruin. Or readers' concern over Lily's compulsive mismanagement of her funds may have brought to mind novels such as Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), classic examples of literary naturalism that preceded *The House of Mirth* and may have set the stage to familiarize readers with the implied fate of a woman who allows herself to become indebted to a man. The primary difference, of course, separating Crane's and Dreiser's heroines from Lily Bart is that they belong to the impoverished lower class from the beginning. If we are to read Lily as a typical female character of naturalism, however, there is no reason to believe that her initial social standing would spare her the fate of decline. In fact, as Donald Pizer suggests, Lily Bart may be read as Wharton's argument that determinism is not reserved for those dwelling in dirty tenements but is, perhaps, democratic in its destruction of lives.

In *The Custom of the Country*, however, Undine Spragg does not focus her efforts on financial gain. Unlike Lily, Undine is not in a position to be constantly balancing her bank books and counting out the contents of her purse. This difference should not be interpreted to mean that money is not important to Undine as she certainly appreciates all of the luxuries it can afford. Even though Undine is not seen actively pursuing money the

reader is made to understand that she has absolutely no intention of doing without it.

While both Lily and Undine see a connection between money and the life they want to lead, Undine is far more ruthlessly manipulative than Lily is. As her second husband, Ralph Marvell, observes:³⁸

... a disregard for money may imply not the willingness to get on without it but merely the blind confidence that it will somehow be provided for. If Undine, like the lilies of the field, took no care, it was not because her wants were as few but because she assumed that care would be taken for her by those whose privilege it was to enable her to unite floral insouciance with Sheban elegance. (93)

Undine's ability to take wealth for granted is rooted, of course, in her father's business success and the fact that, unlike Lily Bart, her financial security has never been threatened. Prior to their moving to New York, Abner Spragg has made some lucrative business deals in the fictional western city of Apex that allowed his family to begin an upwardly mobile climb. Following a discussion in which Undine asks her father to rent an opera box, which he does not immediately assent to buy, though his daughter eventually wears him down, the young woman sulks at the initial refusal, thinking that "she and her mother had always gotten what they wanted without lasting detriment to the family fortunes" (29). The fact that both of Undine's parents are living, enables her to feel confident that her needs will be met with little or no effort on her part. In contrast to Lily Bart is left largely to her own devices after her parents' deaths, relying only upon her

³⁸ Prior to moving to New York City from Apex, Undine was briefly married to Elmer Moffat, who she marries again towards the novel's end. In order to be eligible to marry Ralph and not seem tainted by having been divorced, Undine keeps her first marriage a secret. Though Ralph is actually Undine's second husband, publicly he is thought to be her first.

small income and whatever minimal allowance her aunt provides. Like Lily, however, Undine opts not to comprehend matters of finance, a decision that allows her to also avoid responsibility and thus refrain from curbing her own appetite for consumption, as evidenced by the fact that “her eyes grew absent-minded” when her father attempted to explain why his current financial situation might not make the purchase of an opera box a wise investment (29). However, Undine’s boredom with talking about money is not quite the same as Lily’s complete inability to understand it. Though one could argue that both women’s lack of economic savvy stems from their having been taken care of by others, it is interesting to note that Lily’s unawareness is dangerous to her well-being while Undine’s disinterestedness ultimately has little impact upon her daily life.

Interestingly, the character in *The Custom of the Country* whose relationship to money most mirrors that of Lily Bart is Ralph Marvell. When he faced economic difficulty he turned to business speculation, also gambling on finding a solution to their problems. In his financial transactions, we can clearly see that Ralph is just as clueless as Lily. Always having had a “tranquil disdain for mere money-getting,” Ralph entrusts his money to Elmer Moffat without really understanding the business venture or how any money will be made (48). When Ralph attempts to explain the transaction’s details to his cousin Clare, who has agreed to loan him some money to invest, we see that “her manifest ignorance of business methods had the effect of making his vagueness appear less vague” (284). The inability to understand financial matters clearly places Ralph and Lily in a stratum of society that is ill-equipped for success in the economic market. Established though they may be in terms of social rank, this group lacks the knowledge to

profit in the new age of industrialism and business. Undine, however, is clearly portrayed as belonging to a new generation.

While Lily Bart unwittingly gambles and speculates her way into poverty, Undine has no patience for such behavior. When she reveals during her honeymoon with Ralph that her father has lost money speculating and will not be sending them a check any time soon, Ralph expresses concern for her father's losses and apologizes for not being more wealthy himself. Undine, however, merely dismisses Ralph's concerns and criticizes her father's actions, remarking, "It's father's fault. Why on earth did he go and speculate? There's no use his saying he's sorry now!" (103). Though she gives little thought to money, Undine reveals herself to be fiscally practical. Whereas Lily constantly tried to conceal her lack of resources, Undine brazenly suggests that Ralph ask his sister for money so that she can buy some dresses for the trip home. Ralph notes that, "it was always she who made the practical suggestion, hit the nail of expediency over the head" (104). There are no moral qualms or scruples that interfere with Undine when money is concerned. She is, in many ways, all business to the degree that Lily was not business-minded at all.

As mentioned, Lily's compulsive behavior revolves largely around the acquisition of financial security, something she has felt herself to be lacking for a good deal of her life. Undine, on the other hand, has no such problems with money. That is not to say, however, that Undine is without compulsions and addictions of her own. Though Jennifer Fleissner describes Undine Spragg as "compulsively divorcing" her decisions to marry or remarry have less to do with an interest in marriage itself and are instead much more driven by the desire to increase her social status (199). Just as Lily Bart's gambling and

speculating was performed in the interest of accruing money, not merely for the sake of a thrill derived from the risk involved, Undine's compulsive marrying is motivated by her addiction to accruing status. Though Undine's appreciation of wealth has been established and money still motivates some of her romantic pursuits, material gain does seem secondary to increasing her place in the social hierarchy. Undine's interest in social-climbing is established prior to her marrying Ralph. In addition to the requirements for a lavish wedding, Undine confronts her father to express her expectations that he will provide a monthly income for her and Ralph after they have been married. Abner Spragg, caught by surprise, suggests that Undine break off the engagement and consider instead marrying a man who can afford her expensive tastes. However, Undine's counter-argument makes it clear that while she expects financial security, her father is wrong in believing that to be her primary motivation:

Wait awhile? Look round? Did he suppose she was marrying for MONEY? Didn't he see it was all a question, now and here, of the kind of people she wanted to "go with"? ... Couldn't her father understand that nice girls, in New York, didn't regard getting married like going on a buggy-ride? It was enough to ruin a girl's chances if she broke her engagement to a man in Ralph Marvell's set. All kinds of spiteful things would be said about her, and she would never be able to go with the right people again. (78-79, emphasis in original)

As Undine makes clear in this passage, her desire to become Mrs. Ralph Marvell has everything to do with wanting to join the aristocracy of New York by marrying someone from a well-established family or, as she describes them, "the right people."

Unfortunately for Ralph, Undine grows tired of being married to a man who lacks financial resources and whose poetic disposition she does not really understand, and she sets her sights on Peter Van Degen, a member of the nouveau riche who she thinks will leave his wife, Ralph's cousin, and marry her. When it becomes clear that Van Degen was interested in an affair but will never leave his wife, Undine's continued desire for upward mobility leads her in pursuit of Raymond De Chelles, a titled member of the French aristocracy. Wanting very much to belong to a social group she deems as superior to that of Ralph and Van Degen, Undine goes so far as to use her son Paul to extort money for an annulment from Ralph. Upon realizing that her marriage to De Chelles is not nearly as lavish or glamorous as she had hoped, Undine leaves him in order to remarry her first husband, Elmer Moffat, who has by now become exceedingly rich and influential.

Even the most cursory of glances at Undine's marriage history suggests an inability to choose between title and money, as she marries first for social prestige then pursues wealth, then remarries for an aristocratic title and, after her boredom gets the better of her, returns to a marriage that can furnish her with all the pleasures to be purchased. However, as the novel ends, we see Undine taken with the idea of marrying an ambassador, largely because someone has mentioned in passing that a man in that position could never marry a divorced woman. Undine's compulsivity then might be read as stemming, not just from a sense of lacking money or status, but of lacking things which others possess or deny her. Undine wants what she cannot have and when she does have it, she simply does not want it anymore. As a result, Undine seems almost more compulsive than Lily, whose addictions are driven largely by very practical needs rather

than desires. Highly impressionable, Undine is evidence of an evolution in Wharton's perception of naturalism's scope. Not only do her desires extend beyond the basic needs which motivate Lily Bart, but Undine is absolutely capable of finding a way to possess anything she desires. Thus, her motivations might stem from her environment but she has evolved with a capacity for mastery of that environment.

The treatment of compulsion in these novels certainly establishes Lily and Undine as characters who might help us to mark the progression of Edith Wharton's engagement with naturalism; however, as mentioned early in this essay, the treatment of visual culture provides an even more marked example of the ways in which Lily suffers at the mercy of her environment while Undine flourishes as the master of her own. Throughout the course of each novel both women understand the importance of appearances and do their best to manage and manipulate the way they are seen by others. Always posing and performing, both Lily and Undine are continually aware of themselves as visual objects. However, Lily is ultimately unable to maintain appearances—in part because she lacks money and must ultimately rely so heavily upon the perceptions of others and also because she refuses to wholly participate in the social charade.

From *The House of Mirth's* opening paragraphs we are made to understand that Lily Bart's entire existence is dependent upon her ability to create and maintain appearances and, given that she does not survive the story to its conclusion, it seems that Lily fails to manage the way in which she is viewed. Though Lawrence Selden first glimpses Lily in Grand Central Station and observes that her every movement "seemed the result of far-reaching intentions" the reader understands that, though he might have affection for Lily, Selden never really sees her as she is (5). Though she is always posing

and attempting to use her beauty to her best advantage, Lily's inability to manage her image is evidence in Selden's recognition that "his own view of her was to be coloured by any mind in which he saw her reflected" (126). In addition to suggesting that Lily is incapable of being seen in the way she desires, Selden's observation is an indictment of the way that members of society view each other. Rather than taking in a firsthand view of Lily, Selden looks through an undeniably dirty lens of social gossip and others' impressions. Thus even when Lily does her best to be original we see that nothing really is.

Lily's desire to be seen, coupled with the unfortunate circumstance of her inability to control the way she is viewed by others certainly comes to light when she attends the opera for the sake of having an opportunity to display her beauty. Though she is initially reluctant to accept an invitation from Simon Rosedale, Lily agrees to attend in order to keep him from repeating rumors about her financial entanglements with Gus Trenor. Because Lily is "always inspired by the prospect of showing her beauty in public" she does not realize that the admiring glances she receives include the impatient ones of Gus Trenor who is eager to seek repayment in the way of sexual favors for his investment of her money (91). Though she is as beautiful and is enjoying the attention of others who agree, that Lily is described as one of the "brilliant young ladies, a little blinded by their own effulgence" certainly suggests that the pride she takes in her appearance disables her ability to see clearly beyond herself.

It would be remiss to discuss appearances in *The House of Mirth* without delving into the performance of *tableaux vivants* at the home of the Wellington Brys. In their efforts to establish themselves as a part of fashionable society, the Brys host an evening

in which their friends participate in *tableaux* by dressing and completing still scenes depicting famous works of art ranging from Botticelli to Goya. Many of the tableaux are admired, largely because efforts have been made to match the models with subjects well-suited to their appearance and personality. When Lily appeared, as Sir Joshua Reynolds's portrait of Mrs. Lloyd carving her husband's name into a tree, "the unanimous 'Oh!' of the spectators was a tribute...to the flesh and blood loveliness of Lily Bart." Though she had contemplated presenting a more elaborate image, Lily "had yielded to the truer instinct of trusting to her unassisted beauty" (106). Unfortunately, only her closest friends, Gerty Farrish and Lawrence Selden, see the *tableau* as capturing Lily's natural beauty, unadorned and without interruption from social influence. As if to immediately break the spell and insure that the reader understands Lily's incapacity to control her image, Ned Van Alstyne disrupts Selden's musings over the poetic quality of her beauty with the crass observation that Lily is a "deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up" (106). Van Alstyne may as well speak for the group in identifying Lily as just another "thing" to be appraised.

Though Lily clearly understands that beauty can function as social currency, the real pleasure she derives from her own appearance and that of the luxury which surrounds her, seems to be primarily artistic. Beauty may be a commodity in Lily's social circle but for her it is more than that, in fact in many instances she seems to derive more pleasure from observing beautiful objects than she derives from being beautiful or from being seen as beautiful. Unfortunately, being the artistic eye in a culture of voyeurs is neither profitable nor safe for a woman. Though Selden or Percy Gryce might collect whatever amuses them, despite her heightened aesthetic sensibility Lily can only be collected.

Ironically, it seems that when *The House of Mirth* was published, not even Edith Wharton could control the way Lily Bart was viewed, particularly as the object of someone else's artistic vision. As the author wrote in a 1905 letter to William Brownell, "... I sank to the depth of letting the illustrations be put in the book—& oh, I wish I hadn't now!" (94). Thus we can see that Wharton was reluctant to have Lily's image rendered for readers, perhaps preferring that she only find form in the reader's and the author's imaginations.

In contrast to Lily Bart, Undine Spragg behaves abominably. Unfailingly narcissistic, she acts only to produce more pleasure for herself, often at the expense of those around her, as she perpetually searches for a better, more profitable marriage. However, this paper is less concerned with Undine's selfishness than with why the reader feels compelled to watch her bad behavior—a look at us looking at her, if you will. On the first page of Wharton's novel *Mrs. Heeny*, aesthete to New York's high society and an avid reader of the social gossip columns, admires Undine's appearance, claiming to have "never met with a lovelier form" (1). Conveyed in radiantly descriptive phrases, and likened to a "fabled creature whose home was in a beam of light," there is no denying that Undine certainly appears lovely (15). However, unlike the men who adore her, few readers are drawn solely to this image of beauty. Nor are we dazzled by her sparkling wit, superior intellect, or admirable morality. In fact, Undine possesses none of those attributes. Yet, like Ralph Marvel's very surname, that is what we do: we marvel. Unable to turn away, readers become mesmerized as any of Undine's suitors, failing to recognize that the foundations of what initially appeared to be a *Bildungsroman* have fallen away. Rather than serving as witnesses to a journey of identity-forming self-discovery, readers closely follow the tabloid-worthy progress of Undine's calculated social maneuverings,

watching in awe as she eschews tradition or sentiment in favor of status and power. We are, in a sense, riveted by our own repulsion.

In *Undine Spragg*, Edith Wharton created a ruthless anti-heroine more suited to bear the title “celebutante” than any twenty-first century “It Girl.” The result, however, is that the reader finds herself in an uncomfortable and awkward position staring at her own reflection. Edith Wharton biographer, Cynthia Griffin Woolf, builds upon *A Backward Glance*’s condemnation of the society capable of destroying *The House of Mirth*’s Lily Bart by suggesting that Wharton might have made a similarly scathing statement about *The Custom of the Country*. Woolf supposes that Wharton could also have potentially declared to her readership, “Do you want an image of your corruption? Look at what you have produced! Look at Undine Spragg!” (222). Though Woolf’s Wharton quotation is speculative, her word choice is telling. It is not an “example” of social ills that Wharton presents to her readership; it is an “image,” a mirroring back of all that is gone and going wrong.

While the novel’s title might suggest a need to reconsider, or at least question, national priorities, the compulsive voyeurism which takes place both inside and outside of the novel begs us to question exactly why we want to watch. Is it purely morbid curiosity, an element of schadenfreude, or the aftertaste of naturalism which motivates the reader to wait on edge for Undine’s inevitable demise? Given that Undine not only survives, but thrives, even if readers are motivated by a desire to watch her fall, their attentions go unrewarded. Furthermore, Wharton creates multiple ways of seeing and a multiplicity of visions, which complicate a single conclusion. Juxtaposing Undine’s compulsive desire to *be seen* with Ralph’s obsessive desire to *see*, and placing the

reader's inability to turn away from Undine's story at the center of these poles, Wharton brings into sharp focus the tension between the superficial and the "real," as well as our unfortunate preference for one over the other.

As Undine admires herself in mirror after mirror, and is appraised or imagined by a multiplicity of gazes, the most unsettling aspect of *The Custom of the Country* reveals itself. Refracted and reflected back to us, the compulsive desire to watch, to see, and to be seen becomes exaggerated as Ralph and Undine personify changes in visual perception at the turn of the century. For Carol Baker Sabora, Wharton "reflects the reality of a materialistic society and illuminates the moral void at its center" through imagery of mirrors and lamps (265). The multiple ways in which Wharton presents and creates compulsive voyeurism, both inside and outside of the novel, make it necessary to pull apart the different layers of perception and examine the ways in which Undine and Ralph are seen and see, as well as the manner in which the author manipulates point of view and readerly perspective.

Though readers were riveted by the tragic decline of Lily Bart, even more compelling are the selfish exploits of Undine Spragg. The desire to watch Lily fall, perhaps in the hope that she will redeem herself is certainly strong. However, there is a degree of humanity in Lily's character that pulls upon readers' sympathies and, despite her having been reduced by her social circle, reminds the reader that she is not merely an object. Undine, on the other hand, has no claims on readers' consciences. The more readers watch Undine's exploits, the more they are appalled, and the more mesmerized they become. It is this sense of the sordid, sensational, or secret, not merely the sexual, which creates a voyeur of Wharton's reader. Certainly the exchanges between Undine

and Peter Van Degen are charged with a degree of sexual tension, such as when he inquires as to whether the cost of Undine's portrait comes "higher than the dress" she is wearing (118). However, the voyeurism inspired by *The Custom of the Country* has more to do with social status.

In her study of pornographic literature, Allison Pease explains that voyeuristic consumption of text relies heavily on reinforcing a set of expectations which allow the reader's response to mirror the text's content (84-86). That is, in the consumption of pornographic images, the reader derives his or her pleasure by vicariously experiencing the pleasure occurring within the text. Similarly, Wharton's readers are able to vicariously experience the spectacle of Old New York society through the act of reading her novels. As a completely removed observer, the reader is granted not only access to Wharton's world, but also a degree of omniscience that results from her use of a third-person narrator. Amy Blair observes that readers of *The House of Mirth* "just as surely imbibed the novel's lush descriptions of Lily's surroundings, the details of the lives of her wealthy friends, and the particulars of the elaborate social rituals by which members of the haute bourgeoisie could recognize each other" (150). Given the allure these trappings of wealth would have had, especially for a reader excluded from such opulence, Blair suggests that readers might have located the novel's tragedy not in Lily's death but in her exclusion from this highly desirable world of luxury. The glitter of wealth in Lily's world is just as sparkling in the world of Undine Spragg, it is after all largely the same setting but populated with fresher faces. As Maureen Montgomery reminds us, Undine's New York is "socially promiscuous, with ample opportunities for the display of wealth" and, by virtue of constant exposure, harbors potential for sexual deviation, which only

heightens its attraction (34). Graphic in their description of material goods such as jewelry and clothing, both *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country* might be identified as status-pornography, texts where vicarious consumption, display, and leisure provide as much or more allure than sexual content. By observing the interactions of the social elite in Wharton's novel, the reader participates in an exchange not unlike the transferral of pleasure via pornography.

Interestingly, Lily's vantage point is very similar to that of the reader. Though she is included in society events, Lily's relative lack of money continually places her in the position of outside observer, despite her seeming possession of insider status. Upon her initial arrival at Bellomont, even before the distance between Lily and her hosts is measured by her inability to afford substantial gambling losses, she takes in the appearance of the household, not as an owner or even a guest, but as one who clearly recognizes her exclusion from the luxury of the place:

The hall was arcaded, with a gallery supported on columns of pale yellow marble. Tall clumps of flowering plants were grouped against a background of dark foliage in the angles of the walls. ... the light from the great central lantern overhead shed a brightness on the women's hair and struck sparks from their jewels as they moved.

There were moments when such scenes delighted Lily, when they gratified her sense of beauty and her craving for the external finish of life; there were others when they gave a sharper edge to the meagerness of her own opportunities. This was one of the moments when the sense of contrast was uppermost... (22)

This demonstrates how the reader's hungry desire for descriptions of opulence is mirrored by Lily's own desire to possess the settings in which she finds herself. The detachment Lily feels from her surroundings through the novel should come as no surprise given that she is, for all intents and purposes, homeless. After her parents are deceased Lily rootlessly drifts between her friends' homes and that of her aunt. Described as chafing at the obligations created by existing in the luxury of others and "conscious of having to pay her way," Lily does not mindlessly inhabit the environment of wealth so much as she exists in borrowed finery (23). Though she is not at ease in the extravagant homes of her wealthy friends, as her own fortunes unravel Lily is also uncomfortable in the more modest dwelling of Gerty Farrish which no longer seems charming by contrast but serves only to remind Lily of her own limitations. The sense that small spaces are closing in upon her as finances decrease is especially apparent when Lily, moving too quickly, almost knocks over the tea table at Gerty's apartment and exclaims, "—how beautifully one does have to behave in a small flat!" (206). In addition to suggesting that Lily literally does not fit anywhere, this scene also emphasizes that Lily does not possess a space so much as she decorates one. The moment she attempts to move with any purpose, Lily is reminded to be beautiful and remain in her place.

While Lily observes wealth much from the same perspective as the reader, Undine has a vantage point all her own. Lily might easily be understood as demonstrating Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's claim that "bourgeois pathos" is created "through the sad realization of not belonging." If the bourgeois sensibility is defined by the moment in which "the subject is made the outsider to the crowd, an onlooker, compensating for exclusion through the deployment of the discriminating gaze," the distanced reader's

heightened feeling of detached observation enables an artificial sense of belonging to the upper class (187). Rather than feeling a part of things through personal involvement, the reader must feel apart from things and be in a position to observe. The displacement of intimacy in favor of material goods or social spectacle is not limited to Wharton's reader. For Undine herself "enjoyment was publicity, promiscuity—the band, the banners, the crowd, the close contact of covetous impulses" rather than "personal entanglement [which] might mean 'bother'" (140). Though Ralph views Undine's utter disinterest in potentially complicated relationships as validation of her fidelity, his wife's obsession with public spectacle is just as destructive to their marriage as an affair. In many ways, Undine's most amorous relationship is with the society that takes her in with its eyes, rather with any individual.

The importance Undine places on being seen cannot be underestimated. Though Undine does marry and divorce with astounding frequency, the breaking of marital vows may actually be seen as secondary to Undine's compulsive desire to be visually engaged. In the opening chapter of Wharton's novel Undine receives a dinner invitation from Ralph's sister. Rather than being surprised by the unexpected gesture of hospitality, Undine asks Mrs. Heeny, "Why does *she* want me? She's never seen me!" (6). For Undine there is no doubt that those who see her will admire her. That appearances are crucial is a point made again and again, but never as potently as in chapter five when Undine prominently displays herself in the theater box (Montgomery 132). Though Lily too had made a display of her beauty in an opera box, as mentioned earlier, her performance is not wholly successful. In *The Custom of the Country*, however, Undine's public appearance in the box marks a critical point in her ability to manipulate

her own image. Though she too is beautiful to observers, especially men, Undine is more acutely aware than Lily of the importance of managing her own sight so that she might more adeptly manipulate that of others. Fearing that she “revealed herself as unknown and unknowing” Undine is struck with a realization which becomes “one of the guiding principles of her career: ‘*It’s better to watch than to ask questions*’” (42, emphasis in original). The importance of observation serves as a message both to Undine and the reader. Does Wharton mean to excuse our voyeurism by allowing us to rationalize it as participation in the empirical science of socializing? By watching and learning proper codes of conduct, both Undine and the reader are able to avoid being seen in the wrong way by others who, no doubt, are also watching. In fact, as she surveys the auditorium to find “she herself [at] the core,” Undine is not merely a spectacle but also spectator (39).³⁹ This repeated emphasis on both being seen and seeing reinforces the primacy of visual experience. As Wharton writes of Undine, “Over a nature so insensible to the spells of memory, the visible and tangible would always prevail” (147). The author’s observation about Undine clearly indicates that whatever artistic sense might have compelled Lily to crave beauty, Undine is ruled solely by a cold empiricism.

In *Techniques of the Observer* Jonathan Crary traces vision and its historical construction in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, pointing to a passage in a 1850s essay where John Ruskin argues that in order to realize the full power and potential of artistic endeavors, one must reclaim and draw upon the “*innocence of the eye*” (1, emphasis in original). For Ruskin and Crary, the innocent eye possesses a

³⁹ Maureen Montgomery goes into greater detail regarding this scene and how Undine’s spectatorship shows her to be resisting appropriated by the gazes of others, most notably Peter Van Degen (132-35).

normally elusive “childish perception” and, as a result, can observe without the interpretive burden of a prior consciousness of signification. Colors are seen as pure colors, not as references to other ideas or objects. As an example of such untainted vision Ruskin employs the image of a blind man who has instantaneously been given sight and therefore has no preconceptions about those items upon which his gaze falls (Qtd. in Crary 95). One might easily associate this type of vision with characters who represent the old way of seeing things. In *The House of Mirth*, both Lily and Selden are hampered by their desire to see things as they believe or desire them to be, rather than as they really are. The idealism that clouds Lily and Selden’s vision marks them as characters that are potentially unfit to survive in the reality of New York society. Of course, Selden has the advantage of being a man who can afford to humor his dreamy visions while Lily cannot. In sharp contrast to Lily and Selden, Undine cannot lay claim to such unadulterated vision. However, the same cannot be said of Ralph Marvel. Granted Ralph does not see with the spectacular perspective of recently restored sight, but he also does not see things as they would appear to a more cynical viewer. The influence of imagination, particularly as it pertains to clouded vision, is nowhere as evident as when Ralph is falling in love with Undine.

Ironically, Ralph imagines Undine as the innocent to be saved from “Van Degenism.” (53). Ralph believes his judgments possess clarity because he is “not blind to her crudity and her limitations” but finds them to be “part of her grace and her persuasion” (53). However, his inability to read Undine shows that he has not learned her lesson of observation. While the easy forgiveness of flaws might be quickly dismissed within the early throes of romance, Ralph’s innocent idealism also dates him, just as it

dates Lily and Selden. Rather than seeming a cynic of the sort that cost Wharton the Nobel Prize, Ralph is a throwback to the Victorian way of seeing. Ralph epitomizes Ruskin's ideal, which ultimately leads to his demise. In Undine's New York there is no place for the old way of anything. Ralph's desire to see and his inability to see Undine as she really is certainly speaks to the impossibility of maintaining innocence and avoiding corruption in a social structure where present spectacles are more compelling than memory, imagination, or tradition. Ralph could not see his love for Clare, he could not see Undine's flaws, and he could not see the mistake of his marriage.

That Ralph is doomed seems certain from the outset of the novel. Yet, despite Ralph's inability to thrive in this environment of voyeurism and consumption, the reader experiences his or her most intimate moment with him. Ralph's suicide is physical and violent, embodied in a way that no sexual allusions are. The closest the reader comes to *feeling* rather than *seeing* is when Ralph himself becomes "conscious of seeing [the room] in every detail with a distinctness he had never before known" (297). Then, under the impression that his death will simplify Undine's life, an observation he clearly recognizes as ironic, Ralph "felt again, more deliberately, for the spot he wanted, and put the muzzle of the revolver against it" (297). When Ralph gains his vision, not unlike Ruskin's blind man, what he sees is that he does not belong. The belief that his death will "make it all right" for Undine demonstrates just how unfit Ralph is for the increasingly cynical twentieth century (297).

Tensions between the individual's subjectivity and the influence of capitalism resonate in Cray's *Suspensions of Perception*. Cray points to Henri Bergson's 1896 book, *Matter and Memory*, as an example of attempts made within the study of

perception to “salvage a subjective mode of apprehending novelty” despite modernization. Bergson proposed that the human was constantly in a state of transformation, a compulsive changing and renewing. However, what Bergson did not account for was that capitalism “produced an endless chance of dislocations and destabilizations” (327-28). Where Bergson fails to take materialistic culture and greed into account, Wharton does not.⁴⁰ Undine is constantly looking for new experiences and new identities into which she can insert herself. Though she is always evolving at a heightened rate that serves to further build the argument for her as a “second generation” naturalist heroine in the Wharton oeuvre, Undine is not the only representative of New York society’s new population. Elmer Moffat, like Undine, is also constantly trying to settle on an identity of his own—though Elmer’s motivation differs from Undine’s in that it is largely driven by the desire for financial success—all while pursuing the acquisition of material goods. When Ralph approached Moffat in an effort to raise money to pay off Undine, the latter held up a pink crystal to the light and as he informed his guest that “now and then [he] like[d] to pick up a pretty thing. Ralph noticed that his eyes caressed it” (283). Moffat’s quest for novelty through material possessions is also evident in his desire to acquire the heirloom tapestries of Raymond De Chelles.

Though Edith Wharton’s status as a writer of naturalism has been well-established by many scholars, it is important to revisit the degree to which Lily Bart represented the earliest version of the naturalist heroine—trapped by her environment, observed as though through the microscope championed by Zola, and doomed from the onset to fall

⁴⁰ It is interesting to note that while Bergson failed to note the manner in which capitalism challenged his idealistic view of the individual’s potential for unique perception, he did not fail to win the Nobel Prize for his work.

prey to her own weaknesses. A most telling passage in *The House of Mirth* takes place when Lily describes the “great gilt cage in which they were all huddled for the mob to gape at. How alluring the world outside the cage appeared to Lily, as she heard its door clang on her!” (45). Lily’s realization that she is trapped inside society’s cage, gilded though it may be, and on display not merely for the observation of those in her circle but for everyone to view, is horrifying to her.

Undine, however, never allows the cage door to shut upon her. Even when she feels trapped by her marriage to De Chelles, Undine is always in the midst of planning her escape. Interestingly, the only moment she feels “entrapped into a bondage hardly conceivable” happens to correspond with the only moment Undine no longer enjoys being watched. “Now you see how they all watch me!” Undine exclaimed to Moffat over frustration regarding the constant surveillance of De Chelles’s sisters (350-51). It seems that the only social conventions rigid enough to even temporarily control and contain Undine are French, not American. Of course, unlike Lily, Undine does not tolerate any situation that hampers her freedom. Showing herself to have evolved from the naturalist prototype that created Lily, Undine is ever resourceful when it comes to surviving and escaping unpleasant situations, as proven by her quick adaptability. Thus through by charting the evolution that takes place from Lily to Undine we can ascertain that Wharton meant to comment not just on what society could destroy but also on what exactly it could produce.

Also, by placing Undine’s compulsive desire to be seen alongside the reader’s inability to stop watching, Wharton seems to raise the issues William James wrestled with in his 1912 writings. James saw experience as requiring attention to modern

spectacles in order to serve as “both a simulation of and compensation for a chimerical ‘real’ experience” (Crary, *Suspensions* 361).⁴¹ The reader’s compulsive desire to observe Undine, voyeuristically taking in the trappings of wealth, is evidence not merely of morbid curiosity but of a sense of lacking or incompleteness described earlier through Fleissner’s definition of compulsive behavior. We watch Undine because we want to see what will happen to her, to us.

Though the reader and Lily Bart were similarly exiled to the outskirts of the upper classes, given a window in which to peek but no claim to belonging, the reader is alone in the role of voyeur to *The Custom of the Country*. By situating the reader alone in the position of removed third party, without a character to whom they can directly relate, Wharton allows for a simultaneous experience of both the past, via Ralph, who cannot escape tradition, and the present, via Undine, who cannot imagine the future beyond her immediate desires. What Wharton does not provide is a definite projection for the future. Facing the crisis of modernity, the transition from the old to the new, the answers Wharton does not give are ultimately the answers for which we are looking.

⁴¹ Here Crary draws largely on James’s *Principles of Psychology* (1890) and *Radical Empiricism and a Pluralistic Universe* (1912).

CHAPTER 5

The Bridge of *Barren Ground*: Meta-Naturalism to Modern Naturalism

“Evolution was in my blood and bone long before I had ever read Darwin.”

—Glasgow, Letter dated Feb. 7, 1934

“Beneath dead and dying illusions, *Barren Ground* was taking form and substance in my imagination.”

—Glasgow, *The Woman Within*

On 26 January 1925, Ellen Glasgow sat at her desk and penned a letter to Douglas Southall Freeman, then editor of the *Richmond News Leader*. Responding to Freeman’s prior expression of interest in her work, Glasgow’s purpose was “letting [him] into the secret” that her newest novel, *Barren Ground* (1925), was to be published by Doubleday, Page, and Company on April 15th. Though the letter adheres to all expected standards of modesty, Glasgow fails to suppress her enthusiasm for the forthcoming novel writing, “An author’s opinion . . . isn’t worth much when the subject is one of his own books, but everyone who has read the manuscript agrees with me that it is the best book I have written.” The novel’s strength lies partially, for Glasgow, in its being “a long novel for these days of hurried writing and reading,” approximately 161,000 words, according to her publishers (74).

Certainly a high page count alone does not account for continued interest in *Barren Ground*. Critics have been, and rightly so, engaged with examining the characters and themes which both set this novel apart from and align it with the work of Glasgow’s contemporaries. While one would not want to overstate the importance of length, the 526 pages which comprise Glasgow’s novel serve to create an expansive liminal space in

which the transition from naturalism to modernism can, and must, take place. Arguably, no literary work conforms solely to a single set of genre characteristics; to suggest as much grossly oversimplifies both category and categorized. Yet, even when placed amongst other texts of hybrid genre, *Barren Ground* is unique for its heightened self-awareness and that which it accomplishes. Not only does Glasgow comment upon the limitations of naturalism through her heroine, Dorinda Oakley's, acidulous criticism of her surroundings and those around her—particularly Dr. Jason Greylock—it also posits a modernist alternative to earlier formulas of predetermination and compulsion. In *The Woman Within* (1954), Glasgow's posthumously published autobiography, the author describes how Dorinda took shape in an imagination which was traumatized by World War I. As she questioned how individual pain could be of any import "in the midst of a world's misery," Glasgow came to the conclusion that all suffering is individualized because it can only be measured by "the individual capacity for a sense of pain" (241). The author's own trauma, coupled with the decision to set the story within the somewhat indeterminate landscape of a post-traumatic region, the post-reconstruction south, enables Glasgow to create figures that concurrently resemble specific iconic characters and revise naturalist types. In the isolated setting, sterile as any laboratory Emile Zola might have imagined, Glasgow rigorously tests the tenets of naturalism to see if they retain any relevance to modernity as it unfolds around her. That Glasgow would both incorporate and interrogate the conventions of naturalism does not undermine its effectiveness or legitimacy but, instead, demonstrates her fluency as an author and the primacy granted to the needs of the text. Even more important, however, is Glasgow's attempt to recast naturalism in a modern light—refusing to allow its philosophies to continue supporting

patriarchal denial of responsibility and adding an optimistic counter to its determinism—thus freeing women from the compulsive tedium that characterized earlier works.

Glasgow's claim to stand in the company of Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, and Frank Norris—the usual suspects of American literary naturalism—has been well established by careful critics, though her name still appears much less often than those listed above. Lest it seem she is excluded primarily on account of her gender, Edith Wharton is still more frequently cited as a naturalist than Ellen Glasgow, a distinction that may stem largely from the latter's more secure place in the literary canon. Yet, as early as 1923, even prior to the publication of *Barren Ground*, in an essay titled, "Ellen Glasgow: Her Technique," Frederic Taber Cooper identified Glasgow's relationship to naturalism, praising her by writing "her novels are not only realistic, but they are in the best sense of the term Zolaesque" (16). However, the suggestion of likeness or similarity set forth by the "esque" is complicated when Cooper, in the next breath, names Glasgow as successor to Harriet Beecher Stowe for having shown herself as "the first American woman" to "succeed in writing a genuine epic novel" since the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853) (17). Cooper's assessment that Glasgow's work is both "realistic" and able to "stir [the reader] with the pathos and tragedy" of a well-crafted story seems contradictory, suggesting perhaps that Glasgow's work defied generic categorization well before this essay was written (17).

Though he acknowledges the strength of her realism Cooper identifies the naturalistic characteristics in Glasgow's writing as a product of the early-twentieth century and cannot stretch his imagination to see those attributes as wholly appropriate to a woman writer's work. Realistic though she may be in her portrayal, Cooper deems it

necessary to still find a way of emphasizing her ability to craft an expectedly feminine appeal to readers' emotions. Glasgow's can be "Zolaesque" but for Cooper, because she is a woman, the likeness she bears to her sentimental predecessor is much stronger than any resemblance to the French author. Whether or not this compromise is Cooper's attempt to secure for Glasgow the recognition he feels she has been denied by critics—by using laudatory adjectives such as "human," "tender," and "high-minded"—from readers of the *Little Biographies of Great Writers Series*, cannot be conclusively determined (17). However, given the publisher's advertisement for the series, described as a "wholly unpretentious . . . collection of intimate portraits, sketches, and personalia," "Zolaesque" is no small triumph. Despite Glasgow's relegation to the safer, more identifiably feminine realm of sentimental literature, the foundations for her placement in naturalism had been laid with a single adjective.

In his desire to recover Glasgow from too close an association with naturalism Cooper is not alone. In a 1931 essay titled, "Where We Have Come," Amy Loveman presents a survey of developments in American literature since the emergence of Howells, Garland, and Dreiser—before whom "American writing had been, above everything else, pleasant" (703). With the exception of those unpleasant naturalists, Loveman argues that disillusionment, "bitter enlightenment and vociferous rebellion" are a relatively new development and are indicative of America's having come of age through the trauma of World War I (704). For Loveman, the authors who "viewed their America with clear gaze but without personal rancor" include Glasgow, Edna Ferber, and Dorothy Canfield (708). Glasgow's *Barren Ground* is described as "vivid and humane realism" while *The Romantic Comedians* (1926) is neatly stamped "a brilliant and witty

characterization” (708). While I don’t mean to argue that Glasgow’s novel fails to be “vivid and humane” or to position myself against the claim that she is “brilliant” and “witty”—quite the opposite—Loveman’s essay contains a contradiction similar to Cooper’s by suggesting that the women writers mentioned above must be both objective and sympathetic. It is as though Loveman wishes to reaffirm her belief “that the blemishes and shortcomings” of the American scene were eradicable ills by projecting those views onto the work of these writers (708). Of course the ability to be both objective and sympathetic seems to preclude the ability to be critical or thoughtful in one’s portrayal of a place and people. Glasgow may detach herself from her subject matter and not treat all of her characters with disdain but that does not mean she is blind to the flaws perpetuated by their behaviors and, to a large degree, the novel’s setting. Though *Barren Ground* does contain an optimistic strain, to be explored in greater depth later in this essay, Loveman locates hope by romanticizing the rural landscape and lifestyle rather than acknowledging that Dorinda’s development hinges upon necessity—the need to adapt or perish, forever trapped by the broomsedge.⁴²

Though less optimistic than Loveman’s essay, Dayton Kohler’s 1942 “Recognition of Ellen Glasgow,” written upon the author’s receipt of the Pulitzer Prize for *In This Our Life* (1941), challenges the work of prior critics for “respectfully but uncritically [characterizing the author] as a pioneer of the southern renaissance” (523). For Kohler, Glasgow’s strength as an artist lies in her ability to employ “native skepticism [for] tempering and correcting her regional feelings at all times” resulting in

⁴² Broomsedge is a weedy and invasive plant found in as far west as Texas and as far north as New York state. It is generally disliked for its aggressive growth patterns and some states classify it as a “noxious weed.” Broomsedge is symbolic in Glasgow’s novel because it is not aesthetically pleasing but it is ubiquitous and hardy. (<http://plants.usda.gov>)

an ability to “contemplate her subjects with detachment and clearness of vision” (525). The belief that Glasgow’s successful portrayal of the south hinges upon, at least partial, rejection of sentimentalism is echoed in Granville Hicks’s *The Great Tradition* (1967). Hicks condescends to excuse the “inevitably provincial” in Glasgow’s work but argues that her struggle against sentimentality “robbed her of much of her creative force” (226). The suggestion that sentimentalism is the only genre against which Glasgow might be writing and that regionalism is somehow the innate inclination of women writers speaks more to the values of earlier critics than to the presence of those genres in her writing. Kohler admires Glasgow’s ability to write Dorinda as a character who, failing to succeed in “life with a woman’s emotions” manages to preserve “her integrity as a person” (528). However, the emphasis on Dorinda’s succeeding despite her gender is similar to early praise for Glasgow as a writer whose success hinges upon the impact—positive or negative—of her femininity (528). Praise for a clear-sighted view of southern life becomes praise for the author’s ability to resist the sentimental inclinations ascribed to woman rather than an analysis of how and why such objectivity is important to her work. With the exception of Cooper’s “Zolaesque,” naturalism does not enter into the minds of early critics as a genre fit to issue from a woman’s pen.

While critical perceptions of Glasgow’s relationship to sentiment are certainly useful for understanding how her novel has been classified by others, even more telling is the author’s own indictment of that literary device. In a letter to Booth Tarkington, Glasgow compliments his recently published novel, *Alice Adams* (1921), writing: “You have achieved two things that I had believed almost impossible in American fiction—you have written of average people without becoming an average writer and you have treated

the American girl without sentimentality.” Glasgow then goes on to thank Tarkington for possessing the “courage to end the story in the right way” (68). The “right way” means that the title character, a young woman from the middle class who tries desperately to improve her situation, does not find the happy marriage that might have concluded a sentimental novel or the tragic death that might have been the naturalistic punishment for aspiring to class ascension. Instead Alice Adams accepts the reality of her situation and enrolls herself in a business college so that, rather than husband hunting, she can learn secretarial skills and become self-sufficient. Glasgow’s belief that hard work might be the solution to over-sentimentalized American girlhood and that encouraging women to find a way of supporting themselves is an argument she makes very clearly throughout *Barren Ground*.

More recently, in a 2006 essay titled, “‘Where are the ladies?’ Wharton, Glasgow and American Women Naturalists,” Donna Campbell builds upon the article in which Nancy Walker posed the title question more than two decades prior. While Walker questioned whether or not there were women writing naturalism, Campbell affirms that there are indeed and includes Edith Wharton, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Rebecca Harding Davis, and Ellen Glasgow amongst their numbers. In the first half of her essay Campbell demonstrates how recent shifts in criticism have expanded the boundaries of naturalism and, as a result, created a broader context more conducive to reading women’s writing as naturalistic. A very pertinent example is the manner in which texts such as *Barren Ground* “link the physical environment to representations of labor, sexuality, and maternity in ways that make a viable case for women’s naturalism” (156). As a survey of current trends within studies of American naturalism Campbell’s essay is invaluable, but

it is her emphasis on current criticism's facilitation of a more inclusive and less gendered rendering of the genre that is especially helpful to interpreting *Barren Ground*. After all, if it is only now that critics are setting forth interpretations of naturalism and understanding it in such a way which is inclusive towards women's writing, then it certainly makes sense that Glasgow, however much she might have admired naturalist writers, was also well aware of the genre's limitations for her as a female author.

Glasgow's frustration with naturalism is clearly conveyed through several acts of meta-naturalism. Even as Glasgow is utilizing the tropes of a naturalist novel, at least in the beginning of her novel, she also challenges those very traditions and draws attention to their limitations by using Dorinda's keen observations and insight to criticize the very modes employed in the text. In both writing naturalism and blatantly questioning its philosophies, Glasgow also manages to more subtly meet and subvert the reader's expectations of a naturalist novel through minor adjustments for major impact.

Barren Ground tells the story of a woman, Dorinda Oakley, living in the isolated town of Pedlar's Mill. The landscape is, as the name suggests, "bare, starved, [and] desolate" and "from the bleak horizon, where the flatness created an illusion of immensity, the broomsedge was spreading in a smothered fire over the melancholy brown" (3). Because it is devoid of life with, the exception of a weed, there is the clear insinuation that no substantive life can be supported here. Dorinda's family is land-poor and they struggle to eke out a living from the depleted acres of Old Farm. Early in the novel Dorinda falls in love with Jason Greylock, a young doctor who has returned to Pedlar's Mill to care for his aging, alcoholic father. Before he falls victim to the inevitability of inherited naturalistic traits—in his case, alcoholism, passivity, and a

tendency towards the denial of responsibility—Jason jilts Dorinda, to whom he is engaged, and sneaks off to marry a woman of his own class. Pregnant and abandoned Dorinda exiles herself to New York City. While out in search of work, Dorinda faints in the street and is struck by a taxi. The accident places her in the care and then, subsequently, the employment of the benevolent Doctor Faraday who both mends her wounds and lends her the money to return home and rehabilitate the family farm. Facing trial after trial in what shapes up to be a more than difficult life, Dorinda is surrounded by characters who meet a naturalistic fate, yet she herself does not become a Maggie or a Carrie. Because the car accident caused her to miscarry and she is able to return home from the urban environment without the appearance of having been sexually corrupted, Dorinda models the new-woman of naturalism, the updated, modern incarnation of the Trina-type—a figure whose love of money is not pure lust for gold but is, instead, a desire for capitalist profit intertwined with a love of technological progress, knowledge, self-sufficiency in the modern marketplace, and a sense of freedom based on accepting the inevitability of nature and time.

In the preface to *Barren Ground*, Glasgow identifies this book as her favorite and the one she would choose “for the double-edged blessing of immortality” because it typified the kind of novel she imagined herself writing when she was a girl, longing to capture the essence of the South “not sentimentally” but “dispassionately, as a part of the larger world” so as to convey “human nature” rather than merely the characteristics of the region (vii). Glasgow’s interest in an objective study of humanity, devoid of emotional attachment, echoes the role of the author as posited by Emile Zola in his 1880 essay, “The Experimental Novel,” a work almost always cited as having laid the foundations for

literary naturalism. Outlining the project and process of naturalism, Zola calls for novelists to employ a method of detached observation and to record the human experience without interference, thus replacing “purely imaginary novels” with those of “observation and experiment” (18). While Glasgow does employ strategies of naturalism in the telling of Dorinda Oakley’s story, her subversion of the genre’s conventions show her to be pointing out its limitations as well.

Published twenty five years after Frank Norris’s *McTeague* (1899) and Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900), the opening sentences *Barren Ground*’s “Part First”—the novel is composed of three parts—indicate the burgeoning self-consciousness of naturalism. By carefully constructing a subtle inversion of the naturalist poor-girl-at-the-window scene, Glasgow both conforms to the standards of the genre while calling them into question and exposing their limitations. In the article by Donna Campbell, mentioned earlier in this essay, the author points to the first episode of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s *The Portion of Labor* (1901) and its use of “that most common trope of desire in naturalism, the plate-glass window of a store that separates a character from the goods that entice her” (157). Borrowing from that tradition and distorting “that most common trope” *Barren Ground* begins:

A girl in an orange-coloured shawl stood at the window of Pedlar’s store and looked, through the falling snow, at the deserted road. Though she watched there without moving, her attitude, in its stillness, gave an impression of arrested flight, as if she were running toward life. (3)

Given that the girl, Dorinda, is immediately described as wearing a shawl, the first half of the first sentence leads the reader to expect this to be a different scene of naturalistic

longing—the poor girl outside, pressed up against the glass, wanting beautiful things which are just beyond her reach. To an extent, the window scene Glasgow presents to the reader is reminiscent of those in Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*. However, Carrie Meeber cannot resist the opportunity to purchase necessities for which there is no allotment in her meager budget and, as a result, accepts Drouet’s money for shoes, stockings and “a nice little jacket” (50). Dorinda, we must note, stands on the other side, the inside, of the glass window wanting not finery but *life*. Perhaps Glasgow wishes to stress that while naturalism’s girls spend an awful lot of time peering into shop windows at luxuries they cannot afford to buy, equal time is spent looking out of workplace windows—if they are lucky enough to have a view—at leisure they cannot afford to have. Though Dreiser emphasizes consumer goods by titling the aforementioned chapter, “The Lure of the Material: Beauty Speaks for Itself,” his novel acknowledges that the immaterial can exercise equal pull on naturalism’s young women. Carrie’s evenings at her sister’s home are spent standing in the doorway, unable to venture beyond the step, just as her days are spent staring into the monotony of her work with only her imagination for a window to the outside. Though Carrie craves material goods she also desires a freedom of motion that her world simply does not support. It is important to understand that Glasgow does not reject the relationship of the girl to the plate-glass window but she does complicate it by drawing attention to the lack of opportunity on either side of the glass and reminding the reader that windows possess the ability to be both transparent and reflective.

Glasgow’s alteration of a naturalist scene is facilitated in part by her own distance from the early years of the genre but also by Dorinda’s geographical distance from the common locus of naturalism—the urban setting. While Carrie Meeber moves from rural

Wisconsin to Chicago to New York, a country-to-city migratory pattern common to other naturalist heroines such as Gervaise in Zola's *L'Assommoir* (1877) and Hilma Tree in Norris's *The Octopus* (1901), Dorinda's life begins and ends in the rural locale of Pedlar's Mill, with her only having spent a few years time in the New York City. Rather than existing as a model of the naturalist character who leaves a rural home only to become mired in the slums, Dorinda resists the siren call of the city perhaps because, unlike the drifting Carrie Meeber, Dorinda's rural roots are too deep and too strong to ever allow for permanent transplantation. Also, the motivation for Dorinda's move to the city was not to seek something elusive—fame, money, love, etc.—but to escape the embarrassment she felt over being pregnant and unwed. When her pregnancy is no longer an issue, there is no reason for Dorinda to remain in New York. Richard Lehan suggests that “naturalism came into being to provide a way of comprehending this new reality, the modern city” (32). He goes on to suggest that alternative naturalisms, such as those written by Willa Cather, engage issues of frontier friction between Americans and European immigrants. In *Recalling the Wild* (2000), Mary Lawlor describes the west as a space which allowed for naturalism to test out theories of determinism while not wholly acknowledging the romanticism necessary to envision the frontier as a virgin space for identity formation. Both Lehan's and Lawlor's arguments are helpful as ways to understand both why the city figures less prominently in a late example of naturalism, written after the American public has become more familiar with the concept of urbanity, and why Glasgow might test the limitations of naturalism in a vast rural space.

When writing about her own 1925 novel, *The Professor's House*, Cather claimed to have purposefully made the professor's home “overcrowded and stuffy with new

things” so as to create greater contrast for “the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa” (qtd. in Brown, 142). Though Cather’s breeze relieves the oppressive feeling created by the excess of things inside the professor’s house, the region in which *Barren Ground* takes place manages to seem interior and exterior all at once. Pedlar’s Mill is not solely an urban setting, a cluttered dwelling or a vast isolated and empty plain, yet the contradictions of Glasgow’s depiction manage to make it seem crowded *and* empty, again challenging the standards of naturalism even while adhering to them. The result is that Glasgow’s barren southern landscape, where farmers “conquered the land not by force, but by virtue of the emphatic argument that lies in fortitude,” is as crowded, alive, and deterministic as any city (6). Following a colorful description of the land, sky, and plants in each season, Glasgow writes:

At these quiet seasons, the dwellers near Pedlar’s Mill felt scarcely more than a tremor on the surface of life. . . . The straw would darken as the gust swooped down, and brighten as it sped on to the shelter of scrub pine and sassafras. And while the wind bewitched the solitude, a vague restlessness would stir in the hearts of living things on the farms, of men, women, and animals. ‘Broomsage ain’t jest wild stuff. It’s a kind of fate,’ Old Matthew Fairlamb used to say. (3-4)

Thus the fates of the place and those who inhabit it are largely intertwined—the people are as affected by weather as the animals that live with them on farms. The broomsedge, the invasive weed that grows where nothing else will, stands in as a metaphor for people who try their hardest to do the same. In *Barren Ground*, however, the land is not a romanticized frontier where man can enforce his will and forge his identity; instead

Glasgow's landscape is reminiscent of the urban environment where choice is usurped by determinism, a characteristic of naturalism which Campbell refers to as "antagonistic nature" (165). Old Matthew Fairlamb's observation also reinforces the sense that Dorinda and the other inhabitants of Pedlar's Mill are inescapably tethered to, and not unlike, the land that they struggle to make a living off of (4). Furthermore the setting exemplifies what Bill Brown describes as "the slippage between *having* (possessing a particular object) and *being* (the identification of one's self with that object)," the result being that *Barren Ground* becomes not unlike other "book[s] where things seem slightly human and humans seem slightly thing-like" (13, original emphasis). In Pedlar's Mill the farmers own the land but, simultaneously, the land owns the farmers. It is also important to note that the town, though it does possess a history of having been farmed by immigrants and "tenant farmers," as outlined in the first chapter, is only "thinly settled" (4). Despite the presence of a railroad, the isolation of the town makes the borders as clearly delineated as those of any urban neighborhood.

Though Pedlar's Mill is certainly not a city by any stretch of the imagination, it exists within the larger geographical area of the United States. Given that its inhabitants are largely poor, many are known to be the descendents of slaves or immigrant settlers—Glasgow spends a great deal of time explaining how the English yeoman and Scotch-Irish came to reside in the area—the area appears almost slum-like due to its description being so largely based upon racial identity. It is as if Glasgow has fused the naturalist frontier and the naturalist city to create an isolated space in which the attributes of both blend. The outcome of the experiment is that the deterministic element of the naturalist landscape remains in tact for many of the figures who populate Pedlar's Mill, while

Glasgow is able to remove herself from the urban landscape and focus more specifically on how rural settings handle similar challenges.

Though Dorinda herself escapes the decline of naturalism, her family and neighbors are not nearly as fortunate. Of all the characters who demonstrate the downward trajectory of naturalism, Dorinda's brother, mother, and lover are perhaps the most striking examples. That these figures exist in such close proximity to Dorinda affords Glasgow ample opportunity to comment on the devolution of all three. The actions of Rufus Oakley, Mrs. Oakley, and Jason Greylock certainly facilitate reading *Barren Ground* as a naturalist text, however, Dorinda's insight into the behavior of these characters can prompt the reader to wonder to what end Glasgow wishes to employ tropes of that genre. Rather than establish the novel as firmly situated within the context of naturalism, Glasgow's ironic comments upon the limitations of the genre, result is a type of meta-naturalism, thus situating the novel as a mirror image of naturalism—self-aware that it is the same but different.

Rufus Oakley, a strikingly handsome boy of eighteen years old in the initial chapters of *Barren Ground*, is the youngest of the Oakley children and adored by his mother. The bond between mother and child was supposedly strengthened by Mrs. Oakley having nursed him through a childhood battle with scarlet fever. Rufus is described as having “straight black hair, sparkling brown eyes, and the velvety dark red of Dorinda's lips and cheeks,” in addition to a “temperamental wildness” (39). The attitude which Rufus harbors towards a life of toiling on Old Farm is reminiscent of what Philip Fisher identifies in Clyde Griffiths, the boy-turned-man- turned-murderer of Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925), “the characteristic feeling of western

civilization—resentment” (226). Similar to the way in which “every motion of [Clyde’s] life compounds flight and desire” so does Rufus crave an opportunity to leave his family in favor of city life (Fisher 226). After Dorinda has returned home from New York, Rufus’s lust for leaving is further compounded when he commits an act of violence and must flee not only a metaphorical sense of entrapment but the quite literal threat of imprisonment. As a young boy, Dreiser’s novel—published the same year as *Glasgow’s*—depicts Clyde’s wish to escape the poverty and embarrassment of his parents’ street preaching. Similarly Rufus declares himself “not a slave” and willing “to let the farm rot before it would be [his] master” (56). However, Clyde’s compulsive desire to accumulate money and his desperate attempts to secure the love of a girl well above his social standing motivated his murderous act. In contrast, Rufus shoots a man over a game of cards—gambling and violence both making frequent appearances in *naturalism*. Though Dreiser is not entirely clear as to whether or not Clyde’s murder was wholly premeditated or reflexive, both men’s actions might be described as crimes of passion, acts performed when, feeling themselves backed into a corner that might mean never escaping their present lives, they lash out in an attempt to remove all obstacles to their freedom.

In the case of both men it is their hyper-religious mothers who stand by them in times of crisis. Though her efforts are ultimately ineffectual and her son is sentenced to death, Mrs. Griffiths visits Clyde in jail and embarks on a lecture tour to raise funds for his defense. In the case of Rufus, Mrs. Oakley lies to corroborate his alibi and secures his freedom, thus undermining her own code of ethics and ensuring her own demise. “A pious and God-fearing woman, whose daily life was lived beneath the ominous shadow

of the wrath to come,” Mrs. Oakley’s decision to “perjure herself in order that a worthless boy might escape the punishment which she knew he deserved” wrecks havoc on her nerves (324). Though their mothers are similar in their willingness to sacrifice themselves in an effort to free their children, Clyde’s and Rufus’s sisters clearly demonstrate the difference between Dreiser’s approach to naturalism and Glasgow’s. Unlike Esta Griffiths, Clyde’s older sister, Dorinda is not banished to a tiny apartment to await the birth of a child conceived out of wedlock with a man who reneged on a promise of marriage. Instead, Dorinda, having miscarried prior to Rufus’s crime, is present to comment on her brother’s situation. Esta’s fate is not atypical in naturalist novels and she is severely punished for her mistake and exiled from society. Dorinda, however, does not suffer from the same determinism that punishes female characters who express their sexuality outside the socially-acceptable boundaries of marriage. Though she too becomes pregnant, chance intervenes on Dorinda’s behalf. That Rufus so clearly resembles Dreiser’s classic naturalistic figure from *An American Tragedy*, while Glasgow clearly offers Dorinda as an exception to the rule modeled by Esta Griffiths, demonstrates the author’s dissatisfaction with the limitations of a completely deterministic point of view, especially one that seems to be particularly harsh for female characters.

When her ill-fated brother was first introduced to the reader, Dorinda observed that “nobody expected Rufus to be anything but wild, and it was natural for young men to seek pleasures” (42). In light of the crime her brother does commit, Dorinda’s statement foreshadows a need for culpability amongst those “nobodies.” The lowered expectations of naturalism, the sense that decline is inevitable, are just as detrimental to Rufus’s character as his mother’s reckoning that she “spoiled him” because he was “a mighty

taking child” (317). The lack of accountability, both on the part of Rufus and Mrs. Oakley is troubling, both to the reader and Dorinda who wonders what “obliquity of nature” caused him to behave in such a manner (321). Musing over her mother’s willingness to lie for Rufus, Dorinda criticizes the act as being “less sinful than wasted” and she blames her mother’s sentimentality for inspiring “wonderful” and “ruinous” mother love (324). Exasperated, Dorinda asks herself why Rufus is not “held responsible for his own wickedness” (324). Rufus himself refuses to accept responsibility for his actions, first by suggesting that the murder is his sister’s fault because she did not let him leave the farm the previous spring and then by simply arguing that whatever took place was not his fault (315-16). The willingness to blame circumstances outside of one’s self for one’s actions—the very basis of many naturalist tales—seems to Dorinda a type of “evasive idealism” (325). In addition to seeing this blame-shifting as characteristic of a deterministic outlook, Glasgow also suggests that it is gendered by rendering Mrs. Oakley and Dorinda both as woman who are constantly suffering as the result of irresponsible men.

Though Glasgow’s text certainly engages naturalism, its tenets are challenged not for their cruelty, a criticism leveled at Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome* (1911), but for being idealistic because they take agency away from the individual. This criticism will resurface in the analysis of Jason Greylock later in this essay. Dorinda’s distaste for the misery caused by naturalism’s inevitable tragedies is further evidenced by her resolute claim that “hearts might be broken, men might live or die, but the cows must be milked” (316). For Dorinda, the only unavoidable circumstance worth worrying over is work—

labor on the farm and a movement towards progress rather than decline become the inevitable actions on which she chooses to focus.

Sustaining the land is central to Dorinda's character largely because profitability serves as a means of securing her own independence. The emphasis on locating financial independence within a rural landscape is reminiscent of regionalism's spinsters whose gardens and domestic products enable them to live on their own terms. Dorinda's desires, however, do not end with independence. In addition to maintaining what her father built, she is driven to preserving and enlarging the family farm with a passion that rivals Scarlett O'Hara's devotion to Tara. For Beth Harrison, "through Dorinda's management of her farm and her mastery of the broomsedge, one can see how she transforms the pastoral myth from a male- to a female-centered quest for heroism" (57). Just as Thérèse Lafirme from Kate Chopin's *At Fault* (1890) took control of her husband's plantation after his death, suggesting a revision of southern pastoral genre, so does Dorinda participate in that tradition. Also a keen southern businesswoman, Glasgow's heroine is more than capable of managing her land and its resources. The thirty or so years that separate these novels, however, allow for the shift from Thérèse's land being worked by recently freed but still loyal slaves to Dorinda's land being worked largely by herself. In short, Chopin's earlier revision of the southern pastoral depicted women in a primarily supervisory role while Glasgow's novel allows for women both manage the work and engage in it.

Dorinda's labor is indeed central to many readings of *Barren Ground*; however, it also functions as a sharp contrast to the compulsive labor of her mother. Harrison argues that "Mrs. Oakley is not adept at farming" because in choosing to marry a poor white

farmer she caused herself to descend to a new, lower, and unfamiliar social station which requires an ability to work the land—a skill it will take a generation to learn (57). In this sense, Mrs. Oakley's ineptness on the farm is almost dismissed as hereditary—because she was born in a class above that of farmer, she is incapable of learning how to produce positive results from the land. Though this view is clearly flawed because social class is neither biological nor tied to one's ability to learn, that Mrs. Oakley's ineffectiveness can be read as hereditary clearly places her within the scope of typical naturalist characters. In addition, if we examine Mrs. Oakley's compulsive behavior in the context of naturalism's typical parameters, it seems that Mrs. Oakley is sentenced to that genre's pointless and killing labor even while her daughter is able to resist falling prey to the same fate.

In Jennifer Fleissner's *Women, Compulsion, Modernity* (2004), the author identifies “naturalism's most characteristic plot” as one of repetitive motion which “has the distinctive effect of seeming also like a stuckness in place” (9). Glasgow's description of Mrs. Oakley's relationship to work certainly supports reading that character through the lens of Fleissner's argument.

She had worked so hard for so many years that the habit had degenerated into a disease, and thrift had become a tyrant instead of a slave in her life. From dawn until after dark she toiled, and then lay sleepless for hours because of the jerking of her nerves. . . . Though she spent every bit of her strength there was nothing to show for her struggle. (39)

Not only does Mrs. Oakley moved in repetitive patterns, all but wearing a path into the kitchen floor, her work habits are so compulsive she is barely able to compel her body to

sleep at night. Rather than seeming human, Mrs. Oakley's work habits appear as those performed by a machine that cannot alter its path and so wears itself to ruin. The destruction these movements take on her physical body and her emotional wellbeing certainly do suggest that the habit of work has become a compulsive action that she cannot resist anymore than she could resist a "disease."

Although Dorinda also labors intensely day in and day out, her tasks are performed "not by necessity, as in the old days without system, but by the stroke of the clock" (348). Rather than seeming to be a mechanical object, working with repetitive motions that bring to mind grinding gears and worn down bolts, Dorinda is the master of her own work and harnesses technology—even the clock—to serve her own ends. A clear illustration of the manner in which Dorinda's labors on the farm stand in sharp contrast to her mother's compulsive behavior is the passage which states:

[Dorinda] had worked relentlessly through the years; but it was work that she had enjoyed, and above all it was work that had created anew the surroundings amid which she lived. In a changed form her mother's frustrated passion to redeem the world was finding concrete expression.
(346)

While the "tragedy of [Mrs. Oakley's] lot [was] that all her toil made so little impression," it being futile as well as compulsive, Dorinda's labor is an act of free will—the parameters having been determined not by her inability to control her body but by an active and intellectual determination of what would be best for the dairy farm (39). Furthermore, Dorinda's labor produces positive results which have a profitable market value, a sharp contrast to her mother's work which produces very few results.

The resemblance between Mrs. Oakley and other iconic naturalist characters, such as Frank Norris's Trina McTeague, is heightened by compulsive hoarding. Trina accumulates money, sleeping with the coins and counting them over and over, while Mrs. Oakley hoards something of less material value—her faith. Prayers are, for Mrs. Oakley, a compulsive act of devotion, performed in a room which is preserved just for that purpose, and they are able to transform the farm wife's look into a "mystic gaze" (47). Faith fuels Mrs. Oakley as she herself admits an inability to "keep going" without "the help of [her] religion" (46). Though it might seem difficult to reconcile the greed often associated with naturalism, especially as demonstrated by characters like Trina, with a compulsive desire to pray, if we consider the end results—upward or outward mobility from the slums due to increased financial independence and salvation from earthly troubles due to spiritual salvation—they are similar in that each offers a mode of escape from the compulsive tedium and toil of everyday life.

It should come as no surprise, however, it is not only the intangible which Mrs. Oakley treats ceremoniously—there are the "dozen damask towels, with Turkey-red borders and fringed ends" that she tends to with all the passion Trina shows for her coins (48). As the "possession she prized most," the towels are meticulously cared for, laundered even if only to be immediately returned to their drawer, and used solely by visiting ministers—in moments where the spiritual and material obsessions meet (48). While Dorinda's labors cyclically follow the seasons and are productive, her mother's tasks fall into the naturalist rut of useless repetitive action. Even in the endless action of washing, storing, and washing the towels, Mrs. Oakley shows her labors to be futile. When Dorinda reflects that "there were times when she found it impossible not to scold

at a martyrdom that seemed to her unnecessary” we see the daughter as possessing the objective eye which early critics attributed to Glasgow (54). The compulsive behaviors prescribed by naturalism are as entrapping as they are endless and, through Dorinda, Glasgow critiques the idea that characters are blind to the uselessness of these activities.

The character most enslaved to the determinism of naturalism, however, is Dr. Jason Greylock, Glasgow’s answer to Norris’s McTeague and even Edith Wharton’s Ralph Marvel from *The Custom of the Country* (1913). Though he does not literally kill his wife, as McTeague does, Jason shares an inherited propensity towards alcoholism and the neighborhood rumors, fueled by his mad wife’s assertions that he killed a baby they never had, suggest he is capable of such violence. In terms of temperament, however, Jason is perhaps most like Ralph. Jason’s attraction to Dorinda bears a resemblance to the imaginative vision which drew Ralph to the inimitable Undine Spragg. When Jason drops Dorinda off at home, though he stares directly at her, it is as if he is entirely unaware of her presence and his gaze falls elsewhere, “just as if he were seeing something within his own mind” (35). Rather than looking at Dorinda, Jason looks through her or past her into his own imagination. Dwelling largely in the realm of possibility rather than production, Jason is as optimistic about “get[ting] a few modern ideas into the heads of the natives” as Ralph is about the novel he never writes (32).

Though Jason and Ralph certainly share a lack of conviction, the greatest similarity between all three characters—Jason, Ralph, and McTeague—is the degree to which their blood determines their fate. Richard Lehan argues that “McTeague’s degeneracy seems to be an inherited matter” (122) and while the alcoholism of Jason’s father certainly foreshadows his own addiction, he also demonstrates what Lilian Furst

describes as Ralph's "lack of instinct for self-preservation" (264). By choosing to prioritize familial duty over his own happiness, the same out-dated and idealistic code of honor that keeps Ralph from fighting for custody of his son, Jason chooses to remain at Pedlar's Mill in the service of his alcoholic father, a decision that once made, serves to keep him trapped there permanently. Glasgow's narrator demonstrates an ironic attitude towards Jason's choice, observing that "filial devotion was both esteemed and practiced in that pre-Freudian age . . . and to give up one's career for a few months . . . appeared dutiful rather than dangerous" (13). Jason is not criticized for returning home to care for his father, rather, the narrator seems to take issue with "filial devotion" as an act of obligation rather than a matter of choice. Jason's inability to distinguish what is customary from what is reasonable is, in part, responsible for his fate.⁴³ Dorinda, on the other hand, is much more discerning and quite capable of choosing to put her own needs first, as demonstrated by her decision to purchase a blue dress rather than a red cow—though it should be noted that Dorinda suffers pangs of a conscience Undine does not seem to possess.

Having been established as a character at the mercy of heredity, Jason serves as an ideal representation of naturalism. When Dorinda faces Jason in the barn, after he has gotten her pregnant and then slunk off to marry Geneva Ellgood because he lacked the conviction to resist the urgings of the Ellgood family, he comes to embody all that is potentially negative about too strong an adherence to the philosophical underpinnings of

⁴³ In some ways Jason's decision to remain with his father, despite its detrimental impact on his career, seems almost sentimental in its adherence to an outmoded code of southern chivalry. While it is certainly admirable to help one's aging parents, to do so because of the desire to make a noble, self-sacrificial gesture is just the sort of thing realist writers would have criticized.

naturalism. Attempting to excuse his cowardly behavior Jason takes pains to exonerate himself of any responsibility:

It was something I couldn't help. ... They made me do it. ... Well, I'm like that, so you oughtn't to blame me so much. God knows I'd help it if I could. I never meant to throw you over. It was their fault. They oughtn't to have brought that pressure to bear on me. They oughtn't to have threatened me. They ought to have let me do the best I could. (168)

To Dorinda it seemed as though Jason “went on endlessly, overcome by the facile volubility of a weak nature” (168). He compulsively excuses his behavior, repeating phrases that blame others, in a tiring drone while Dorinda recognizes the uselessness of all his objections, must as she had the clarity of vision to understand that her mother’s efforts were completely futile. Dorinda’s clarity at that moment, her “piercing flash of insight [when] she saw him as he was” encourages the reader to see the danger posed by naturalism (169). Just as her brother failed to take responsibility for his actions, so does Jason attempt to blame others for his inability to assert himself. It is one thing to be relegated to the role of victim by the forces of naturalism, however, it is quite another thing—and a worse one—to revel in the fact and hide behind it. In fact, towards the very conclusion of Glasgow’s novel it is Jason’s lack of conviction which Dorinda credits with landing him in the poorhouse, reflecting that “it was not sin that was punished in this world or the next; it was failure. Good failure or bad failure, it made no difference, for nature abhorred both” (484). Dorinda’s observation suggests that, much like herself, nature does not want what can be easily won. Jason’s refusal to take credit for his own

actions and his constant efforts to place blame for all of his shortcomings upon heredity render him worth of neither love nor hate, only indifference.

Much as Glasgow's position within the sphere of naturalist authors has been secured by conscientious critics, so has Dorinda's place within the cast of naturalism's characters been secured by her author. "Caught like a mouse in the trap of life," Dorinda realizes early on that "no matter how desperately she struggled, she could never escape; she could never be free. She was held fast by circumstances as by invisible wires of steel" (57). Yet, throughout the remaining 500 or so pages of *Barren Ground*, struggle is precisely what Dorinda proceeds to do. Although initially every day "was like every other day in the past" Dorinda refuses to settle into the predictable patterns that exercise such a strong hold on her mother and Jason Greylock (57). As a character that can clearly see the negative impact of a deterministic view on those who surround her, Dorinda is able to resist the traps of naturalism with an effectiveness not seen in many other novels of that genre.

Glasgow's argument for Dorinda as a modern female character can be located in descriptions of her business savvy. Not only is she an adept laborer and manager, Dorinda is an enterprising woman who understands the modern marketplace. After returning from New York, Dorinda is determined to salvage the family farm, a project she undertakes by building a dairy and making butter to sell to hotels. Dorinda's product is very clearly marketed towards a specific and specialized audience. In a sense, the butter produced in the Oakley dairy prefigures many of the boutique food items which would become popular almost a hundred years later. Rather than a dewy daydreaming

milkmaid, a character to be found in naturalist novels by both Norris and Hardy,⁴⁴

Glasgow describes Dorinda as a serious business woman who closely supervises her endeavor:

From the moment the warm milk frothed into the pails until the creamy butter was patted into moulds and stamped with the name Old Farm beneath the device of a harp-shaped pine, there was not a minute detail of the work that was left to others. Even the scalding of the churns, the straining and skimming of the milk in the old-fashioned way without a separator,—all these simple tasks came under her watchful eyes. (311)

The meticulous production of her butter demonstrates the degree to which Dorinda understands the demands and values of the marketplace, including the concept of branding though it was not known by that name in the 1920s. Unlike other naturalist heroines who find themselves in trouble due to financial naïveté or who serve as a reminder of inherent greed, Dorinda is an example of progress and technology. Even prior to the dairy's establishment, Glasgow carefully details the pursuit of knowledge and information that enables Dorinda's success.

Though Dorinda escapes the tragic fate that might have befallen her, the novel's conclusion is clearly modern in its ambivalence. Dorinda does marry a man but he is not Jason Greylock and the marriage is not predicated on romantic love. Instead, Dorinda marries Nathan Pedlar, her friend's widower and it is a compatible and companionable marriage, though not an especially passionate one. Unlike the men who surround her,

⁴⁴ Both Hilma Tree, from Norris's *The Octopus*, and Tess Derbyfield, from Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, are excellent examples of dairy maids in naturalist novels. In each of these texts, however, the use of milk suggests fecundity and unspoiled innocence, thus foreshadowing each character's decline.

Nathan is a suitable choice because he is not handsome but he is heroic, a trait that is reinforced when he sacrifices his life to save women and children during a train wreck. Following his death, Dorinda reflects that “it was true she had missed love” but she realized now, at the age of fifty, that she had found fulfillment because her happiness “depended upon nothing but herself and the land.” The further observation that “to the land, she had given her mind and heart with the abandonment that she found disastrous in any human relation” reinforces Dorinda’s preference for the security of place over the instability of other people (470). The location of happiness built upon industry and place, rather than human relationships, certainly implicates a movement away from the shifting unpredictability of people and towards a modernist solution where fulfillment is only found in sacrifice and compromise. The juxtaposition of the naturalist tropes with a movement towards modernity—both in form and content—is illustrative of Glasgow’s flexibility as an author. Ultimately it is Glasgow’s consciousness of modernist ambivalence, her ability to both subscribe to and question tenets of naturalism, which enables both meta-naturalistic commentary and the genre-blending of *Barren Ground*.

In a 1995 essay, “*Barren Ground* and the Transition to Southern Modernism,” Julius Rowan Raper argues for Glasgow as a pioneer of modernism in southern literature. Raper’s argument is based almost entirely on the “psychological complexity of *Barren Ground*” and the impact of biographical material, such as the Civil War, on Glasgow’s writing, as well as an impression of the author written by Alice Toklas (146, 149). It seems strange that, as many of the stock traits associated with modernism are attributed to WWI, Raper does not touch on the part that event played in the development of Glasgow’s novel. Certainly that war, fresh in the author’s mind during the creation of

Dorinda's story, is at least partly responsible for both the inclusion of modernist ambivalence and the recasting of naturalism in Glasgow's work.

In her autobiography, *The Woman Within*, Glasgow recounts how, upon America's entry into WWI, her fiancé "threw himself ardently into the Red Cross" never to return—not because he perished, it seems, but because the allure of heroism was greater than that of marriage (230). While he was away that winter, the author's thoughts mirrored the darkness of anything found in an Eliot poem. Though her nightmares are recollected, they suffer no softening effects of distance. She writes:

The worst thing about war is that so many people enjoy it. And as long as so many people enjoy it, there will always be war. For the cause and cure lie not in diplomacy, but in the dark labyrinth of subconscious humanity. Night after night, I saw, in imagination, the gangrened flesh on barbed wires, the dead, stiffened in horror, the eyeless skulls and the bared skeletons, the crosses and the poppies, the edge of the universe. Night after night! (233)

Though horrific, the author's graphic dreams reveal a concern not merely with moments of war but with the human capacity to inflict pain and suffering. The source for Glasgow's morbid modernism and her horror at the possibility of cruelty as an innate human trait can be found in the progression of her own thoughts. Earlier in her autobiography, prior to this recounting of her nightmares, Glasgow had recalled a time when she'd have been able to "pass successfully an examination on every page" of Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (88). Later, in the context of war, Glasgow felt herself barely able to recognize the behavior of "the creature ironically known as *Homo sapiens*"

(234, italics original). Following the years when “war went on, life went on, death went on” *Barren Ground* was conceived “beneath dead and dying illusions” (241). Those “dying illusions” are largely responsible for Glasgow’s efforts to reconsider and recast naturalism. Though she had read Darwin, she could not claim to understand why humans—especially men—could perpetuate a scene of so much violence and suffering. Though people might in fact evolve, there was certainly no guarantee that their evolution would be towards any kind of good.

Given the historical context of the war, the author’s familiarity with Darwin’s work, and her biographical assertion that the mid-twenties meant “novelists and critics alike were tumbling, head foremost, into the soft modern theories” while “dreary Behaviorism” promised to triumph, it does not seem a stretch to suggest that *Barren Ground* provided Glasgow with a place in which to test naturalism’s tenets and posit a modernist approach to determinism. This modernist naturalism is most clearly defined by two characteristics. Firstly, men cannot utilize naturalism’s philosophies as a means of escaping accountability for their actions. Instead, the individual is responsible for, at the very least, attempting to adhere to an ethical code of conduct despite the inevitability of what is to pass, as well as for acknowledging responsibility for their own actions when they stray from this code. Secondly, the aforementioned inevitability means that the individual, even as they struggle against fate, may find a degree of solace in resignation, as can be seen by Dorinda’s wish that her mother might pause from her compulsive labor and, in acknowledging its futility, free herself from it despite its inevitability.

‘No matter how hard you work, the dirt will always be there,’ Dorinda persisted. . . . They might as well be living in the house, she sometimes

thought, with the doctrine of predestination; and like the doctrine of predestination, there was nothing to be done about it. (54)

Dorinda, like Glasgow, would be rendered emotionally hollow by romantic disappointment and physically hollow by miscarriage, but she could not help seeing the futility in fighting fate. However, despite the “inevitable triumph of time,” the struggle is what separates Dorinda from Mrs. Oakley and Jason, characters who accepted their future before it had come to pass (506). The ability to save one’s self from this bleak determinism is the ability to recognize what is inevitable and to fight hard against what it not. While these two principles—responsibility and resignation—are in many ways contradictory, they also reflect modernist ambivalence and the fragmented psychological vantage point which enables the inclusion of a meta-character, Dorinda, who both participates in and questions the novel.

Though it is admittedly dangerous to conflate author and character, the knowledge possessed and valued by Dorinda in the waning pages of *Barren Ground*, reflects the language which permeates the conclusion of *The Woman Within*. In the latter pages of Glasgow’s autobiography she wrote that, at the age of sixty, upon completing *Barren Ground*, she “knew that [she] had found a code of living that was sufficient for life or death” (271). What that code entailed, Glasgow does not say. However, in the preface to *Barren Ground*, the author describes the writing the novel as a “vehicle of liberation” following on the heels of some tragic years (vii). The preface concludes with the author’s recognition that, as the novel neared completion, she “saw ... Dorinda was free, while the theme was still undeveloped, to grow, to change, to work out her own destiny” (ix). The text of the novel itself, as it draws to a close, includes Dorinda’s realization that “she

faced the future without romantic glamour, but she faced it with integrity of vision” (525). The meta-naturalism seen earlier in this essay reaches its most potent in the intertwining of these statements. Equipped with the multiplicity of modernist vision and with naturalism’s emotionally-detached objective observation, Dorinda has been transformed from the subject of an experimental novel to the agent of her own experience. That is, one might argue that Glasgow’s own search for meaning, motivated by trauma and the uncertain and unsettling atmosphere of war, enabled the author to adhere quite closely to the parameters of Zola’s experimental novel, stepping back far enough to observe the true behavior of her character. Freed from the burden of authorial hypothesis, the character was liberated to comment on experiences as they unfolded.

The result is that both the dangers and inevitability of naturalism are treated in Glasgow’s work. Though the author employs modernist modes—disillusionment and the hyper-aware character—these techniques are situated alongside tropes of naturalism. Despite the resulting juxtaposition, Glasgow does not ever wholly undermine the legitimacy of determinism. Instead, like her character, Glasgow faces the genre with eyes wide open and presents negative examples of the waste created by cowardice and passivity, as well as an example of the woman’s life worn to nothing by ceaseless repetitive toil. Responsibility for decline is attributed to nature, certainly, and that view is not challenged in *Barren Ground*. However, Glasgow does challenge the ways in which characters accept or resist their fate. Setting forth Dorinda as a figure of perseverance the author encourages active engagement in life as an antidote to complete hopelessness and despair, though we should note that typical modernist ambivalence replaces the possibility for complete happiness with only the potential for partial satisfaction at the

cost of choices having been made. Though Dorinda's life is certainly not always happy or without suffering, self-sufficiency and acceptance are presented as highly desirable alternatives to the endless loop of compulsivity. Thus the modernist naturalism which takes root in Glasgow's novel is a hybrid of determinacy and determinedness—an inability to leave the broomsedge, coupled with an ability to see broomsedge as beautiful.

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