

“BUT, DEAR ME, LET US BE ELEGANT OR DIE;” AN EXPLORATION OF OPPRESSIVE
TRENDS IN THE LANGUAGE OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN CONDUCT
MANUALS AND THE RESPONSE SEEN IN WOMEN’S LITERATURE

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts

Department of English Language and Literature

Central Michigan University
Mount Pleasant, Michigan
May 2017

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2017

This is dedicated to Miles
for your constant encouragement
and convincing me that this was possible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank everyone involved on my thesis committee: Dr. Anne Alton, Dr. Nicole Sparling, and Dr. Eric Russell. I deeply appreciate all of you taking the time to read through my work and consider what I've written. All of your feedback has been immensely helpful. I would also like to thank my committee chair and advisor, Dr. Patterson. Your constant guidance has been essential throughout this entire process. Thank you for helping me to explore something that I can continue to develop for years to come.

ABSTRACT

“BUT, DEAR ME, LET US BE ELEGANT OR DIE;” AN EXPLORATION OF OPPRESSIVE TRENDS IN THE LANGUAGE OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN CONDUCT MANUALS AND THE RESPONSE SEEN IN WOMEN’S LITERATURE

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This thesis examines nineteenth century American expectations for women at the time. To explore the cultural attitudes toward women, this thesis utilizes the conduct literature produce throughout the century. Typically, this literature was written by men, though some women contributed, and traditionally outlined behavior expectations. The books tailored toward women’s conduct illustrated a very specific image of what a proper woman should look like. This thesis makes the argument that this model that conduct books perpetuates stifled the unique identity development in women. This is also explored through the literature written by women during the time. Beginning with *Charlotte Temple* (1774) and with *The Awakening* (1899), this thesis examines the differing treatment of female characters by their female authors. Over time trends appear showing stricter conduct books and the women’s literature pushing even harder against the social constraints.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

America Conduct Book History and Female Authorship

A woman in the nineteenth century had many roles to fill. She was expected to be the perfect proper lady along with fulfilling all of her responsibilities as a mother and wife. Luckily for these women, they had conduct and etiquette books to guide their way. These books ranged in topics from what the table setting should look like at a dinner-party to how to dress for a funeral, but most of them have sections dedicated to enforcing the traditional belief that women were expected to dwell solely in the domestic realm. The beginning of the century's conduct texts were typically in essay form with moral lessons and preachings. As the century progressed, the conduct books became bigger, stricter and broader in topics. With these strict expectations forced on women, there was little movement inside the already suffocating constraints of nineteenth century, American society. Due to the strict nature of these books, women were not given the chance to find their own identity. The language and rhetoric of conduct books stifled the development of unique expressions of self in women, and this can be examined through nineteenth-century women's literature.

History and Trends of Conduct Books

Expectations for women in the nineteenth century can be examined accurately through the conduct and etiquette books published during the time. They were used as manuals of proper behavior. In most cases, authors would bluntly define the role of a woman in society, which was always illustrated as domestic. The conduct books found in the United States were largely imported from England during the period of colonization. These early conduct books were

typically religiously founded and were used to illustrate how the proper Christian woman would behave (Newton 63). Colonial women were expected to transition from the pious maid to the virtuous wife. These expectations continued to be the foundation of conduct books into the nineteenth century (Newton 65). Conduct literature, during this century, was being published in larger numbers and becoming staples in every home. The availability of these texts can be explained by the new need for information that stemmed from advancements in publishing technology. Historians note that, “‘Information’ as a concept is, of course, subjective, but... the Victorians were explicitly recognizing the value of information as a thing in its own right, and as a commodity, something certainly reflected by the growth of business and commercial information during this period” (Weller 666). Manuals and texts of this nature were a popular commodity for lower classes as well. It was easier to access the information than ever before due to publishing advancements and these texts brought conduct books to those who may not have had access in the past.

A major theme among the conduct books of the early republic was female obedience. The conduct books published in the early part of the century were typically comprised of short essays. J. Burton’s *Female Education and Manners* (1793) is a two-volume piece with approximately fourteen lectures in each volume. His text tackles many facets of life for married women and young girls. Throughout his text, Burton consistently advocates for female obedience. Burton suggests that daughters are to first be obedient to their fathers and then to be obedient to their husbands (96). Above this familial obedience, women must also be obedient to God. Sarah E. Newton notes the prominence of religion in conduct books saying, “This religious emphasis in conduct books places the woman firmly in the theocentric universe, represented

quite concretely by a series of male authorities emanating from the essential fatherhood of God” (67). Using the importance of religious teaching to keep women in place was an essential tactic for the conduct writers. Newton argues that the foundation of conduct novels was religion because the writers use the logical comparison of Christians and Christ to wife and husband: “Just as the Christian freely chooses to accept Christ and must be obedient to His dictates, so the woman chooses her husband but must then be obedient to him” (67). This establishes a crucial rhetoric for conduct writers because they must balance a woman’s relationship to the dominant forces in her submissive life. This rhetoric also establishes that men serve as a god-like figure in their own home.

Burton’s text is steeped in the importance of religious duties and establishes women as the caretakers of society’s morality. After discussing the responsibilities of women at home, Burton explores this concept of women being a watchful eye over society: “Your influence in Society, either as Daughter, as Wives, or as Mothers, is so extensive, that it must be extremely political, to direct it aright” (61). In other words, the role of women in society is too important to let women make their own judgments. This rhetoric is apparent throughout the century, which I will refer to as the “greater good” rhetoric. The men writing these books of conduct use this rhetoric to keep women as servants of the patriarchy. Making women believe that their obedience and submissiveness was benefitting society perpetuated an unjust manipulation of women resulting in women lacking a unique identity outside of their domestic one.

John Bennet echoes Burton’s sentiments in his own essays of female conduct, *Strictures on Female Education* (1795). His text focuses on the nature on female education, and highlights the good that women do in society through influence. He argues,

Their influence often lends considerable aids in the formation of those characters, which history distinguishes with its undying honours. Many are the heroes they have roused into glory. Innumerable are the statesmen they have raised, by their secret magick, into fame.

(99-100)

Women are not meant to be the great leaders or heroes, according to this logic. They are the mothers who bare and raise the heroes. The accomplishments of women lie in who their children become. This is another example of the “greater good” rhetoric, and this thinking perpetuates submission. The presumption is that women will continue to stay within the domestic sphere if they read language that presents their role as changing the world through influence.

This oppression not only marginalized women, but also kept them from developing any sense of identity outside of the domestic sphere. This can be seen in Bennet’s argument for the purpose of women’s education: “Their education will principally form their character and manners” (61). Here Bennet is making it clear that the goal of an education for women is to make sure that they have the proper character and conduct, which is defined in conduct literature written mostly by men. Bennet goes on to detail why this education is so important saying, “if we consider the strong and universal force of this passion, the manners and characters of women will have the strongest reciprocal influence on the pursuits and habits, on the complexion and the taste, on the private and the publick happiness of any people” (61). Women’s education must be focused on manners, because influencing others is the role of women. Women did not need an education in science or law, because that wasn’t how they were meant to change the world.

Without an education focused on exciting and stimulating their minds, women cannot tap into their true potential. Educational practices that focused on character and manner not only stifled

expression, but also the development of an identity. When a woman is told how to “be,” she can never explore the many facets of her being.

As the nineteenth century progressed, the still new American republic was finding its footing developing conduct literature outside of the English influences. With that, the focus of the conduct literature started to move towards the minutiae of public interactions: “As time went on, the manuals gave increasing attention to the ceremonious aspects of social intercourse. In particular the distaff side [i.e. female] was instructed what to wear, how to arrange dinner, what diversion to seek and how to converse in company” (Schlesinger 7). The texts were still considering religious and moral education, but the need to regulate social behavior grew more important to conduct writers over the century. In Mrs. L.G. Abell’s book *Woman in Her Various Relations* (1855), the issue of conversational conduct is explored. This text is an example of the movement from collections of a dozen or so essays to categorized manuals broken down and organized by smaller details. One portion of Abell’s text, titled “Customs and Courtesies of Social Life,” defines conversational tactics. Abell justifies the importance of staying dignified in good company, saying, “Every lady should be perfectly conversant with the courtesies of life, and the laws and customs of regulated society. She needs this for the comfort of her family, to preserve her dignity, and to avoid wounding anyone by mistakes and slights” (91). The way a woman presents herself is not only a potential detriment to her own reputation but also that of her family or husband. Conduct literature never separates the woman from the home and her husband. Even when the topic is the words a woman speaks, they are not her own, but are a reflection of her family.

Conduct books in the nineteenth century began to encourage a better education for women, but only within what were considered feminine subjects or disciplines that could be applied domestically. To move away from Bennet's view of an education based on manners and behavior, conduct writers in the latter part of the nineteenth century expanded the scope and subjects that women could think to study, but still confined a woman to "studying only those topics and areas considered fit and appropriate for her, such as biography and religion" (Newton 75). When women kept their studies to subjects that were considered feminine, they didn't push the boundaries of societal expectations. John H. Young compiled the conduct book *Our Deportment: or the Manners, Conduct, and Dress of the Most Refined Society* (1885). This book discusses the role of the woman's education in terms of her duty as a mother: "How important, then that she should cultivate her mental faculties to the highest extent, if for no other reason than to fit herself the better for the performance of this great duty of educating her children" (233). The author is suggesting that mothers broaden their knowledge of science or literature, but the guiding force of this encouragement was to truly benefit her children and not herself. A worry that is discussed when considering women broadening their education was that this would lead to more masculine women. Typically, a higher education was made available to the men in American society. If women began to become more intellectual, it was feared that they would take on more male characteristics and would not be able to fulfill their true duties as a wife and mother (Young 74).

Most conduct literature relied on the cultural expectation that women were the domestic caregivers when the authors defined the rules of conduct in the home. In *American Etiquette and Rules of Politeness* (1883), the authors begin their chapter dedicated to the home by identifying

who is most responsible in this capacity: “While all can contribute to [the home’s] joy and happiness, there is no concealing the fact that it is pre-eminently the kingdom of woman” (Houghton 37). Because women were charged with taking care of the home, child-rearing was also their priority. This can be seen quite clearly as the authors delve deeper into domestic expectation in their chapter on the home. This chapter is separated into subsections, and one of these sections is titled “The Mother’s Influence,” and unsurprisingly, there is no section for the father and his influence on his children (43). This conduct book serves as a manual for wives and mothers to find their roles as women. Those who tried to defy the rules in these books, which reinforced the patriarchal society in place at the time, could have their reputations ruined. Nina Baym notes the important role of the wife, saying, “First, home was a haven in a heartless world, a protected retreat where men could rest and recover from the injuries they sustained in public; women’s job was to soothe, divert, and entertain them” (11). Women were expected to not only keep the house perfect, but must also be a vessel of joy for the man of the house.

The organization of *Our Deportment* is similarly structured as *American Etiquette*. A portion of this book shows women their duties to their husbands and how they can fulfill them. Young claims that the husband has taken his wife and placed her in a new home (213). Women make a transition from their father’s home into their husband’s home. There was not an opportunity for women to live on their own or gain independence. Their status in life was defined by the man that they serve. With this portion discussing the duties of the wife to her husband, it would seem natural, as a modern reader, to expect a section on the duties of the husband to the wife, but this book lacks anything discussing how a husband can treat his wife.

The husband's role is to work and earn a living and he has no domestic responsibilities when he returns home (Young 214).

A woman's reputation was truly what was at stake if she chose to violate the rules of conduct. If her reputation was soiled, that woman's image in society would diminish. Because the self and identity that women cultivated relied solely on domestic merit, ruining this reputation meant losing an identity for many American women. The authors of *American Etiquette and Rules of Politeness* spend a chapter of their book discussing the importance of the perfect woman. They claim that "Women must be pure, that is, they must possess that virtue which wins laurels in the face of temptation; which is backed by a mighty force of moral principle; which frowns on evil with rebuking authority; which claims as its right such purity in associations" (Houghton 178). When looking at all of these expectations laid out by the authors, an image is conjured showing a woman in charge of her home, children, her own purity, fighting evil and surrounding herself with those who are pure. The weight on the shoulders of a woman was heavy. The hope of the conduct book writers was that with the help of these books she may be able to navigate society and keep her reputation intact.

By the end of the nineteenth century, conduct literature looked quite a bit different from the texts written at the beginning. The conduct books were broken into chapters which tackled an array of subtopics within the chapter. The subsections tended to be short and concise to make the lessons perfectly clear. Visually speaking, the latter conduct books now contain illustrations. Women could not only read about their desired behavior, but they could see it when they examined the illustrations of the dutiful wife sitting happily at home with her children. Some of the most popular texts written, such as *American Etiquette and Rules of Politeness*, could be

upwards of 400 pages. This extensive cataloguing and categorizing made for much less wiggle room for women. The presentation of the expectations of conduct was more strict and unyielding.

Rhetorical Strategies of Conduct

The strictness of the standards of conduct can be even more contextualized when considering the rhetorical strategies used by conduct writers through time. The conduct novels in the early part of the nineteenth century were certainly used to explain roles within the culture, but the language was not as stringent as it was at the end of the century. This is seen in the excessive use of modal verbs in the early conduct literature. Traditional modal verbs are “can, could, may, might, must, shall, should” etc. (Westney 1). Thomas Branagan, on almost every page of *The Excellency of the Female Character Vindicated*, uses the word “should.” There is a passive connotation to the use of this modal verb. When cautioning women against premarital sex, Branagan says, “Women should act with the most becoming reservedness and modesty, in the presence of their suitors” (132). Though the author is speaking about a very serious topic, he uses a modal verb which gives women the choice to be modest and leaves this to their discretion.

A trend present in the late conduct books is the strategic use of modal verbs. *American Etiquette and Rules of Politeness* shows this in the section dedicated to “Home, and Home Etiquette.” The passage opens saying,

Home may be the brightest place on earth, or it may be the gloomiest. To make it the grandest of all institutions—to make it the one place ever dear to the heart, should be the ambition alike of parents and children. While all can contribute to its joy and happiness, there is no concealing the fact that it is pre-eminently the kingdom of woman. (37)

At first glance, this passage seems progressive in saying that children and the parents are together responsible for the happiness of the home. However, when looking more closely at the word choices, it isn't really saying that at all. The passage utilizes modal verbs like "may," "can," and "should." This gives the reader a sense of possibility and choice in regards to who "may" be responsible. Then the author goes on to make a definitive statement with no room for interpretation saying, "it is pre-eminently the kingdom of woman" (37). This solidifies the female role in the home. While the children and husband could help in making the home a happy place, it isn't their realm. For the woman, there are no "mays" or "mights" being used to define her role in the home. This further oppresses women and forces the domestic identity upon them. The conduct books also utilize figurative language in their arguments. As noted in the discussion of the use of modal verbs, the home is compared to a kingdom by the authors of *American Etiquette*. This is also present in many other texts from this time. In *Our Deportment*, the author begins the section "Home Life and Etiquette" saying, "Home is the woman's kingdom, and there she reigns supreme" (Young 206). The language sounds empowering for women by giving her rulership over the home. This places her in a seat of power domestically, but when examined, it is also paradoxical. To be the ruler of a kingdom, one would have to be the king. A woman cannot be the king, because the husband is given that role within the home. The paradox continues in *American Etiquette* when the authors say, "If woman rules and directs this little kingdom to the comfort and blessed-ness of her family, she has done what God intended in giving her to be 'help-meet' of man" (Houghton 37). First, the author calls the home a 'little-kingdom,' which in itself is an oxymoron. Then the author calls the wife the 'help-meet' to her husband, which places her in a subordinate position to her husband.

An over-arching theme throughout the conduct literature is the rhetorical use of religion, duty, and the home. The conduct writers weave religion into domestic and familial duties to separate and define the roles of men and women. The authors of *American Etiquette* show that God has destined women to run the home by making her the help-meet to men. This is a gender role that is present in the conduct books of the early part of the century as well. Barangan uses similar language and rhetoric to connect religion and marital duties saying, “The female character is excellent indeed when their deportment is consistent with the end and design of their creation, to wit: the glory of God, their own peace, and to be man’s help-mate” (60). He argues that women are only good when pious and helping the men of the family, which further intertwines marriage and submissive female gender roles.

Nineteenth Century Women Authors

A portion of women who found their reputations in danger during the nineteenth century were writers. In the early nineteenth century, women writers were becoming more prevalent and were sometimes seen as novelty. The pieces women wrote were more often about ordinary, everyday situations (Helsing 26). This genre of writing is considered “domestic” writing, which Nina Baym describes as “mostly about social relations, generally set in homes and other social spaces that are fully described. The detailed descriptions are sometimes idealized, but more often simply ‘realistic’” (26). The living situations were also depicted as unhappy, which adds to the realism and creates plot lines that the women reading would be more likely to relate to.

A possible reason for more involvement in writing by women is, as some critics theorize, the emergence of a bourgeois class. Women had less strenuous domestic duties than they did in

the past (Baym 11). As women had fewer responsibilities dealing with livestock or weaving, the wives and mothers had more time for leisurely activities like reading and writing. Women were steered toward reading and writing poetry during this period. The art of poetry was thought to evoke an emotional response that ladies of the time would be more likely to connect to. With this shift in ideals, woman poets were also seen to be more upstanding than previously perceived. It was now a possibility that someone could be a poet and still be a proper lady even though the woman's ultimate duty resided in the home (Helsing 26).

Like poetry, many women found fulfillment in writing historical pieces. Nina Baym notes the influence that women were having on historical works saying, "Such work developed from the campaign to install history as the centerpiece of female education, in order to connect domestic women to the polity, bring civic self-understanding to the home, and bridge the widening spatial gap between sites of public and private activity" (11). Writing became a way for women to become more involved with the world around them though their expected roll resided solely in the domestic realm. Baym also goes on to note the great impact that women's involvement in historical writing and reading saying, "To study history was indeed to link individuals to the nation, to construct them as national subjects" (20). Writing about history was a way for women to bring themselves closer to culture in a more public sphere, though most of their expected duties were private.

Novels were the most prevalent medium women were reading and writing. Lydia Maria Child dedicates a chapter to women who read in her mothering manual, *The Mother's Book* (1831). She notes the importance of reading saying, "I think a real love of reading is the greatest blessing education can bestow, particularly upon a woman. It cheers so many hours of illness and

seclusion; it gives the mind something to interest itself about, instead of the concerns of one's neighbors, and the changes of fashion" (87). Reading was a perfect outlet for creative and imaginative energy as long as the novels were chosen wisely. Child does caution against becoming too engrossed in reading on too many occasions. She suggests that if a mother sees her child is reading too much the best thing to do "is to allow the occasional perusal of novels, which are pure in spirit and in language. When a taste is once formed for the best novels, silly, lackadaisical ones will have no charm" (90). Through a more developed sense of good or bad fiction, children would grow to be more well-rounded adults.

Female authorship is considered in the conduct book *Letters to a Young Lady* (1806) by Jane West. She notes that for a woman to step into the public eye as a writer she must be willing to put her reputation on display. West makes the comparison of a woman to a captain of a ship: "The perishable commodity of female fame is embarked in a slight felucca, painted and gilded indeed, and externally both convenient and beautiful: but in no means fitted for those distant voyages" (39). West argues that a woman is not prepared to enter into the public sphere as an author. Her reputation would be torn to pieces and she would sink to the bottom of the sea. West's meaning behind her metaphor is put very clearly as she states, "Literature is with us an ornament, or an amusement, not a duty of profession; and when it is pursued with such avidity, as to withdraw us from the especial purposes of our creation, it becomes a crime" (329). West upholds the traditional belief that women are creatures of domestic environments and when they attempt to venture outside of this realm, the result will be chaos.

My thesis looks at changing trends in the deprecations of female identity in women's literature and compares them to the cultural expectations of women during the nineteenth

century. Through the eighteenth century and during the early nineteenth century, the seduction novel was a popular form of fiction. These seduction novels tended to be cautionary tales, which presented the reader with a moral that compares similarly with the expectations laid out in the conduct literature of the time. Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1794) is considered the quintessential seduction novel and begins my exploration of women's identity and conduct. Then I look closely at *Female Quixotism* (1801) by Tabitha Gilman Tenney, which cautions against overly romantic follies but also explores the confinements of female expectations and gender roles.

After considering the cautionary tales from the beginning of the century, I will evaluate pieces written with more independent female voices. Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* (1827) showcases an early, somewhat-stronger female character displaying physical and ethical courage amid wilderness and adventure. Similarly, the treatise on nature, *Lichen Tufts from the Alleghanies* (1860) by Elizabeth C. Wright is a call for women to go out and experience nature. Wright blatantly contradicts the societal image of ladylikeness by encouraging women to study botany, explore off-trail terrain, and wear shorter dresses. Both pieces explore women who push social boundaries and showcase a sense of self shaped by nature, and that differs from cultural expectations as expressed in conduct books.

Then I will examine Lousia May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) and Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World* (1850) both of which advocate for even more female independence while also considering developing identity in women. The emergence of identity can be seen in both novels as they explore growth in coming of age stories that speak to female identity, but also explore how outside influences shape individual growth.

Finally my examination will conclude with a look at cautionary tales, with more obvious meaning behind them than those from the early nineteenth-century. Charlotte Perkins Gillman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) show the constraints that women feel when the expectations of the patriarchy are forced upon them. Domestic expectations drive the women into mental illness and to suicide. Gilman and Chopin display what happens to women who are forced to fit into the model that society has created, which stifles self-expression.

CHAPTER II

CHARLOTTE TEMPLE AND FEMALE QUIXOTISM: CAUTIONARY TALES OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1794) is credited with being the first best seller in the United States (Harris 393). This seduction-and-abandonment novel chronicles the fall of the title character and inspects the choices of the characters around her. Sadly, Charlotte's story ends tragically with her death, as most seduction stories do. Charlotte's tragic fall is due to Rowson's protagonist being void of an identity. Rowson explores the difficulties for women being forced to fulfill the strict expectations of submission and never being able to develop their own identity. The conduct literature of the time perpetuated the ideal that women fit into one model domestically which stifled the ability of girls like Charlotte to develop their own sense of self. *Charlotte Temple* depicts a woman unable to flourish when exposed to the world due to society stifling her development of self.

Rowson wrote the novel for a public seeking the amusement that sentimental fiction of the time was providing. Pattie Cowell notes that Rowson used these literary trends to her advantage saying, "Rowson was wise enough to understand the power of social and literary convention and strong enough to use them rather than be used by them" (7). Because sentimental fiction was so popular, Rowson was able to convey powerful messages through her fiction for a wide audience to read. The audience for sentimental fiction tended to be younger women. One of the factors that contributes to this was the American Revolutionary War: "Because of the high mortality rate during the Revolutionary War and the population explosion in its aftermath, by the first decades of the nineteenth century, a full two-thirds of the white population of America was

under the age of twenty-four” (Davidson 188). Because of this, critics can speculate that much of Rowson’s audience was the youth of the early republic.

Besides being a work of sentimental fiction, *Charlotte Temple* is a quintessential example of a seduction novel. Davidson argues that this genre arose due to “The huge social interest vested in women’s sexuality, which was fetishized into a necessary moral as well as a social and biological commodity” (185). There is an abundance of power placed in women’s virtue, and writers knew that the eighteenth-century readers would be very interested in fiction written on this topic. Most of the seduction novels were also written about young women. Writers knew that a younger audience would be the readers of their fiction and targeted them directly with these cautionary tales (Davidson 188). Elizabeth Barnes notes that “Eighteenth-Century seduction novels offer their own full-length ‘easy reading lessons’ for feminine audiences, displaying and inculcating sympathetic attachments that will put narrative lessons [in]to effect” (60). There was always a moral to be learned from the seduction genre. Rowson opens her cautionary tale *Charlotte Temple* with the words: “For the perusal of the young and thoughtless of the fair sex, this tale of truth is designed; and I could wish my fair readers to consider it as not merely the effusion of Fancy, but as reality” (37). Rowson wants to make it perfectly clear that the woeful events that befall her Charlotte could happen to any of her readers. Many critics believe that her narrator’s presentation of the events is what made the novel so popular in not only Rowson’s time, but also for centuries to follow (Barnes 61).

Because Charlotte’s dependence on the people around her is common throughout the novel, many critics debate whether Charlotte was truly active in her own story. Rebecca Garden explores Charlotte’s lack of autonomy and authority over her own experiences. She argues that

Charlotte is not taught the verbal language to establish a sense of self or identity. However, through her body, she can take control (49). Garden notes that without the ability to express her feelings or needs through spoken language, Charlotte gives herself physically to her seducer making her sins stem from her bodily temptations (49). Garden takes this further, blaming Charlotte's blushing for her downfall: "When Charlotte meets Montraville and blushes, signaling her desire for him and triggering his own, she initiates the courtship while appearing to retreat from it" (49). Charlotte's blush is physical, but allows her to convey to Montraville her feelings outside of verbal language. Marion Rust also explores Charlotte's agency through physical experiences, but contradicts Garden's argument. Rust sees the novel as a portrayal of "the fatal consequences of a woman's inability to want anything enough to motivate decisive action" (102). Rust views Charlotte's passive experience as malleable by outside forces due to her lack of enthusiasm. Cathy Davidson discusses this theme of passivity in sentimental fiction: "The concomitant unstated premise of sentimental fiction is that the woman must take greater control of her life and must make shrewd judgments of the men who come into her life" (189). The issue of autonomy was an ever-present one among the contemporary literature of Rowson's time.

Charlotte's lack of independence seems to stem from cultural perceptions of how women should behave. J. Burton's *Lectures on Female Education and Manners* (1793) shows the societal attitudes toward daughters in the late eighteenth century. In his text published a year before *Charlotte Temple*, he notes that obedience is key in daughters and a "proper" education is where this starts. He then goes on to argue that, "when you go abroad into the World, you will perceive, that every Community, whether political or social, is subject to certain laws for its quiet and security. You will be disappointed, if you expect that your will is to predominate. The

harmony of families will soon be destroyed without subordination” (74). Charlotte seemed to be aware of this problem and allowed Montraville to make choices for her, and her seducer used the obedience that she learned against her. Rowson’s narrator shows Montraville’s power over the passive Charlotte: “It would be useless to repeat the conversation that here ensued; suffice it to say, that Montraville used every argument that had formerly been successful, Charlotte’s resolution began to waver, and he drew her almost imperceptibly towards the chaise” (69). Though Charlotte objects to Montraville’s suggestions, she ultimately gives in and leaves England to travel to the United States. Montraville sees Charlotte’s obedience and uses this to seduce her. Charlotte was not given the opportunity to develop a unique personality as a more independent woman in her culture of the time. Without this chance, Charlotte becomes the passive and obedient woman that society wants her to be, while making the poor choice to travel abroad with her seducer.

Charlotte leaving England with Montraville is still troubling, however, when considering all of the evidence that Rowson provides for Charlotte’s being a dutiful daughter. After Charlotte’s father points out that she is a good girl, her mother comments, ““She is indeed,” replied the fond mother exultingly, ‘a grateful, affectionate girl and I am sure will never lose sight of the duty she owes her parents’” (58). Obvious foreshadowing aside, Charlotte’s parents see her as a wonderful child who knows that she cannot disobey her parents, but she does. Her lack of identity leads to a lack of autonomy. She cannot make choices on her own and needs guidance from an outside force. While away from home, Charlotte unknowingly seeks someone to fill the role of her parents and give her direction in her life. Montraville steps in and fills that role for Charlotte, and due to her passivity and naiveté she is incapable of pushing him out. She

tells him that they cannot meet each other anymore. She and Montraville have a conversation in which he pleads with her for just one more evening visit, while she says no. She says ““Perhaps I may”” (62) in response to his asking her to meet the following night. Charlotte is like clay in Montraville’s hands; he can mold her and achieve any outcome he wants. Her lack of self allows her to be susceptible to the whims of others. Without a strong identity, she cannot stand her ground against her seducer. After Charlotte says she might see him the next night, and Montraville leaves her, the narrator reveals that “Almost a week was now gone, and Charlotte continued every evening to meet Montraville” (64). Charlotte needs someone to stand in and make choices for her. Without her parents nearby, she is vulnerable and can be taken advantage of.

Burton’s lectures on conduct can also give a glimpse into cultural perceptions of the virtue of youth and pleasure during the end of the eighteenth century. He makes the bold statement that “Pleasure has enticing charms to young Minds. But think not, my young Audience, because I propose to consider it in a moral view” (217). Here Burton begins to connect his idea of pleasure with morality and religion. This is problematic because the connection to religion does not give young people the tools to face difficult situations. It only makes them feel shamed when they do not know how to make their own choices. Rowson links Charlotte’s fall closely with religion as well. After Charlotte leaves with Montraville, the governess states, “pleasure should never make us forget our duty to our Creator” (70). Not only do daughters have the duty to their parents to stay chaste, but they must also protect their virtue for religious purposes. With such strict duties in all aspects of her life, Charlotte isn’t given the

chance to make independent choices and is accustomed to doing as her parents intend and as she believes her God wills her to.

In his *Strictures on Female Education* (1795), John Bennet echoes Burton's sentiments in connecting religion with virtue. Bennet argues, "Passions, heated by excess and unrestrained by religious principles, will be violent and ungovernable" (64). Without a foundation in religious doctrine, women were perceived to be helpless. Rowson's narrator also seems to believe that pleasure is something women need to actively avoid and ward off. She pleads to her young readers to "kneel down each morning, and request kind heaven to keep you free from temptation [...] pray for fortitude to resist the impulse of inclination when it runs counter to the precepts of religion and virtue" (55). The absence of temptation in their lives is something girls must beg for daily in prayer. Rowson is aware that most girls are not given the skills through education to avoid and decline temptations. Rather, women deny the existence of the temptations and fall victim to seducers who prey on their instilled obedience. Because virtue is so innately linked with religion, prayer instead of education is the answer to the prevention of shame.

Burton goes on to argue in his lecture on pleasure that people need to use reason, conscience and passion to moderate pleasure. Without this balance, or the proper understanding of these characteristics, Burton argues that one can be plunged into sinful activities (224). Charlotte shows that she has a sound conscience, and of the three characteristics that Burton advocates, this seems to be her strongest quality. It's clear throughout her narrative that Charlotte knows the difference between right and wrong. After Charlotte has been swayed to go with Montraville, she shouts, "'Oh! my dear forsaken parents!'" (69). Then she promptly faints as any delicate lady should. She knows she's making the wrong decision, but one could speculate that

she lacks reason according to the logic that Burton provides. Though her conscience is strong, she cannot outwit Montraville. He has shown that he won't stop his acts of persuasion until she folds to his wishes. He utilizes his skill with argumentation to exploit her lack of reason.

Charlotte is also a character lacking in passion. It is not clear what she wants or if she has an inner driving force that can move her to make her own choices. Burton notes that unchecked passion can motivate a life of vice in excess. However, Charlotte does not show signs of being a passionate character. Rebecca Garden speaks to Charlotte's lack of passion saying, "Charlotte's passive and compliant femininity, embodied rather than performed, debilitates her" (54).

Charlotte does not know how to take action or feel anything about her experiences because she has been trained to be a submissive and obedient woman. Without a unique identity that is completely her own, Charlotte has no apparent passion or needs. This is where Burton's arguments seems to go wrong. Passion does not propel Charlotte into losing her virtue. It is the absence of passion in her character that keeps her from pulling against oppressive forces like Montraville.

Charlotte is clearly lacking in fundamental characteristics that would offer her the chance to resist Montraville's advances, but outside of her loss of virtue, Charlotte has all of the qualities of the "perfect" Victorian woman by being passive, obedient and dependent. J. Bennett sees female fulfillment as completely founded in patriarchal notions. He asks his reader, "when can woman ever be said to consult the real dignity and happiness of her sex, but when she is thus conscientiously discharging her duties to the man" (76). A woman's happiness, according to Bennett, is wrapped in how she can serve the man in her life. This is a major reason for Charlotte's downfall. Early in her life, she had been taught to serve her father, but when she is

away from home, she quickly finds guidance in Montraville, the new man in her life. Bennett explores the role of women in relationships further stating, “conversation would give cheerfulness and delicacy of sentiment; and [men’s] would give instruction” (77). Women provide men with happiness and joy, while men initiate the direction in their lives. With conduct literature like Bennett’s essays so prevalent in society at that time, it would be hard for women to see anything outside of these strict gender roles. Charlotte was not given the chance to flourish or develop her own sense of self, and she was only provided with dutiful expectations of obedience.

Rowson’s narrator is relentless in making sure that anyone reading Charlotte’s story would feel some semblance of guilt. By beginning the novel telling her reader that the events that take place could happen to anyone, she is establishing fear. After Charlotte’s mother learns of her daughter’s downfall, the narrator asks the reader to “once more read over the sorrows of poor Mrs. Temple, and remember, the mother whom you so dearly love and venerate will feel the same, when you, forgetful of the respect due to your maker and yourself forsake the paths of virtue for those of vice and folly” (74). Rowson wants to make her points clear by forcing her readers to put themselves in her character’s shoes. Her readers will evaluate their own actions and how their choices affect the people around them. These moments when the narrator pauses to insist that the readers take warning make the cautionary tale even stronger and more forceful.

However, Rowson’s motives are much more complex than simply presenting a cautionary tale against ruined virtue. Rowson is also cautioning against the female education that produces women too docile to actively reject an aggressor. Charlotte lacks a unique identity and sense of self that would allow her to be an authoritative force in her own story. Her ability to build this sense of self is stifled by the ideals of women being passive and obedient that was

perpetuated by conduct books. Rowson's narrator cautions against young women losing sight of themselves when around deceptive men saying, "when once a woman has forgot the respect due to herself, by yielding to the solicitations of illicit love, they lose all their consequence, even in the eyes of the man whose art has betrayed them" (78). Before a woman can turn away an aggressor, she must have the ability to act on her own. Without a sense of self, Charlotte doesn't have the power to act independently, which makes this novel less a cautionary tale against loss of virtue and more one cautioning against suppressing identity and independence in young women.

Tabitha Gilman Tenney's *Female Quixotism* (1801) is another early American novel that uses a tragic heroine to caution readers. The novel still stirs debate among critics. The intentions of Tenney is unclear due to her conservative background and the novel's connections to *Don Quixote* (1605). Generally, critics argue whether Tenney intended to question gender expectations or if she was simply cautioning against women reading romance novels (Harris 541-6). Though the protagonist, Dorcasina's, narrative is traditionally read as a tale cautioning against women getting absorbed in the fiction they read, it is actually, and more importantly, a novel about a woman lacking control in her own story. Tenney shows in her novel that the oppressive expectations of women, found in conduct literature, actually kept her protagonist from finding fulfillment outside of American cultural expectations.

There seems to be a spectrum of criticism regarding Dorcasina's autonomy or control over her actions. W.C. Harris takes a radical stand and sees Dorcasina as a progressive female characterization who is conscious of her actions. He notes the debate among critics, but affirms "Dorcasina's fantasies are—and also potentiate—acts of choice" (543). Tenney uses Dorcasina's folly and romanticism to depict a woman conscious of her decisions and conscious of her reality.

Cathy Davidson sees the gender commentary in Tenney's novel, though she does not take as radical a stance as Harris. Davidson notes that Dorcasina's story is a satire of women who read novels but "is also a larger satire on a whole society in which a deficient educational system and dubious sexual politics render women devoid of judgment by deeming judgment, in a woman, superfluous quality" (276).

Dorcasina is an avid reader and builds her character on the novels she reads. Many conduct writers in the nineteenth century saw novel reading as a problem. John Bennett condemns fiction in most forms in his conduct book. He argues that "Licentious writings, (the produce of so rank an era) Romances, Novels, Pictures, and the varied, *indelicate* representations of the stage will accelerate the last convulsions of virtue, and smother the just expiring embers of female reserve" (65). To conduct authors like Bennett, novels are corrupting young women who haven't yet fully developed their moral character. Bennett goes on in this section to note that the corruption from romances just takes the general population of women, as he considers it, even further down the most torturous trails: "Inconstancy will be frequent, and divorces sued for...A vagrant, ever restless appetite will pant for variety, Libertinism will erect its desolating standard on the ruins of delicacy; and, in the general perversion of taste, chastity will become an unfashionable virtue" (66). Bennett's logic starts with women reading romance novels and ends with the fall of virtue in society. He uses an appeal to his reader's emotions to spread awareness about his concerns for the minds of women. He even likens women reading fiction to the fall of the Roman Empire (66). Cathy Davidson notes that sentimental novels pushed the boundaries in regards to gender politics more than critics give them credit for (35). Conduct writers would see

the norms being questioned in the contemporary fiction, and visions of a burning of society and morality would emerge as they have for Bennett.

Just as male authors were advocating against novel reading, women conduct writers took a stand against it as well. Jane West in *Letters to a Young Lady* (1801) cautions her readers against reading novels before developing strong moral convictions: “Shall we inquire what impressions romantic adventures, high—wrought scenes of passion, and all the turmoil of intrigue, incident, extravagant attachment, and improbably vicissitudes of fortune, must make upon a vacant mind, whose judgement has not been exercised” (33). West worries that young women have not experienced enough complications in their lives yet to explore novel writing. This argument also supposes that young girls do not possess logic or reasoning to make their own decisions and would instead do as the heroines in their novels do. Lydia Maria Child expands on the negative effects of novel reading by comparing the consumption of novels to food. She says that novels are “a sort of literary confectionary; and though they may be very perfect and beautiful, if eaten too plentifully, they do tend to destroy our appetite for more solid and nourishing food” (87). Just as dessert will ruin dinner, Child argues, fiction will ruin the mind. Her solution is to emphasize the importance of reading historical texts above fiction in the home (87). This, Child believes, will keep children from ruining their minds with fanciful fiction and corrupting their morals.

Tenney clearly reflects, in *Female Quixotism*, this negative attitude that nineteenth century Americans had toward novel reading. When discussing men who are interested in Dorcasina romantically, the narrator notes that Dorcasina tends to keep to herself, which means

that gentlemen are not calling upon her with much frequency (14). However, her literacy also plays a factor in suitors' attitudes toward her:

some of the gentlemen who were fortunate enough to be of her acquaintance, knew how much of her time was dedicated to novels [...] Those therefore acquainted with this circumstance, notwithstanding the temptation of her money and her agreeable person, were too prudent to think of seeking her in marriage. (14)

The men whom Dorcasina encounters find her charming and her money is enticing, but her love of literature is a deterrent to them. This is in line with the attitudes of the conduct writers. Like Child's comparison of novel reading to gluttony, the men in Dorcasina's life do not want to marry a woman who spends much of her time immersing her mind in fiction.

The narrator, it's also important to note, is aware of the negative attitude toward novel reading. She notes that Dorcasina has learned to keep her reading habits a secret from men: "It was sufficient to keep them at a distance, to know that she read at all. Those enemies to female improvement, thought a woman had no business with any book but the bible, or perhaps the art of cookery; believing that everything beyond these served only to disqualify her for the duties of domestic life" (14). Here the narrator is calling attention to this oppression of female development. She is noting the exact rhetoric being used by conduct writers that wish women to keep their concerns in the domestic sphere, and at the same time advocating for women to continue to expand their minds through reading. She does not say that Dorcasina stops reading to appease her gentlemen callers, but subverts this passion and keeps it hidden. This allows Dorcasina to possess the control of her own identity, and not submit to the expectations of society.

Though Dorcasina is characterized as seeing a romanticized reality often throughout the novel, she clearly has the ability to think logically. She shows these dual aspects of her personality in a scene discussing her feelings about a prospective love interest, Lysander. After discussing with her servant Betty her expectations of falling madly in love with him, Dorcasina moves into an analysis of the moral conflicts of marrying someone with slaves: “But what gives me the greatest pain, is that I shall be obliged to live in Virginia, be served by slaves, and be supported by the sweat, toil and blood of the unfortunate and miserable part of mankind” (8). She doesn’t romanticize this aspect of the prospect of marrying Lysander. She sees the severe injustice that is taking place in the Southern states and discusses this at length with Betty. Though Dorcasina’s judgment is predisposed to fantasies and whimsy, she does think deeply and is a highly intellectual portrayal of a female character.

Tenney ends her novel with Dorcasina’s letter to Harriot which discusses Dorcasina’s regrets looking back at her youth. Dorcasina advises Harriot against letting her daughters grow up the way Dorcasina did:

And now, my dear Mrs. Barry, if you should ever be blessed with daughters let me urge you [...] to copy in their education, the plan pursued by your excellent mother. Withhold from their eye the pernicious volumes, which, while they convey false ideas of life, and inspire illusory expectations, will tend to keep them ignorant of every thing really worth knowing (325).

The “every thing worth knowing” that Dorcasina refers to would be the reality of a woman’s place and role in society. Dorcasina waited for the romance that she read about in her fiction, and never found it to be obtainable. Though Dorcasina is cautioning young girls against getting

swept up in novel reading, this isn't Tenney's intention. After all, the young women who need cautioning were reading a novel. Tenney is not lamenting girls who immerse themselves in books, she is lamenting a society that does not permit young women to express themselves, to have control of their reality, or develop strong, unique identities. Dorcasina's tone is mournful, but not because of her submersion into fiction, rather because society was not ready for a heroine so in control of her own self and so in tune with her own needs.

Tenney's intentions are to also show the oppression of female identity through Dorcasina's persistence to read. In her letter to Harriot, she tells her friend, "I read them with the same relish, the same enthusiasm as ever; but, instead of expecting to realize scenes and situations so charmingly portrayed, I only regret that so unalloyed felicity is, in this life, unattainable" (325). Dorcasina always longed for the words she read to be a reality in her own life, but found that the fiction was not representative of real life. However, Dorcasina is still a highly intelligent, reasonable woman which was not commonly portrayed in nineteenth century conduct books as what the ideal woman looked like. Women served within the domestic sphere, so being well-read was not essential, as the narrator points out early in the novel. Dorcasina is frustrated that the romantic vision of life that she always longed for cannot ever be true, but also she is frustrated that her mental stimulation through reading was always looked down upon and goes unrewarded. Society perpetuates the continued generations of women who lack unique character and identity. Dorcasina cultivated her own sense of self, but in her adulthood saw that she could never be accepted by her society and would not achieve the life she read so much about.

Both of these novels present cautionary tales with woeful endings. Dorcasina does not get the life she read and dreamed about, and Charlotte dies shortly after giving birth to her child she has out of wedlock. Although, on the surface, these novels seem to be cautioning against seduction and reading too many novels, they actually are also cautioning against the oppression of women through strict gender expectations. Charlotte could never build a real sense of identity because she so easily subscribed to the female expectations. Because of this, she was easily taken advantage of throughout the novel. Dorcasina had a strong sense of self, but could never be taken seriously by society and ends her novel unmarried, which would have been a tragic end to women of the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER III

EXPLORING THE BOUNDARIES OF NINETEENTH CENTURY WOMEN'S EXPECTATIONS IN *HOPE LESLIE* AND *LICHEN TUFTS*

America in the nineteenth century saw radical changes industrially, politically and culturally. Women writers were becoming more prevalent and very widely read (Baym x). In the first half of the century, Catharine Maria Sedgwick published her historical novel *Hope Leslie: or, Early Times in the Massachusetts* (1827). It was read by many and explored perceptions of a title character who defied the typical expectations of women. In the later part of the century, the little known Elizabeth C. Wright published *Lichen Tufts: From the Alleghanies* (1860), a treatise that explores the relationship to nature and advocates for women exploring the wilderness. Both of these texts push the boundaries of what was ladylike in the nineteenth century. Authors of conduct books used increasingly firmer language throughout the century to guide women into their proper place in the domestic sphere while Sedgwick and Wright questioned the inequality in societal expectations, and show women embracing knowledge and developing identity through nature.

The “greater good” rhetoric affects conduct book readers’ understanding of what roles women should play in the home and American society. Charles Butler’s *The American Lady* (1833) dissects what qualities a woman in the nineteenth century must have while also thinking about the negative qualities that must be snuffed out. He begins his conversation on “The Female Character” with a discussion of women who are unhappy serving the domestic sphere. He thinks women who seek something more than motherly/wifely duties are missing the bigger issue and are “under this impression, either do not discern, or will not be persuaded to consider, the real and deeply interesting effects, which the conduct of their sex will always have in the happiness

of society” (14). Butler, and many authors of conduct books, believe that women serve the community by influencing children and men, but their role is not to cause change. Women were praised into passivity with the language in conduct literature.

Catharine Maria Sedgwick approaches the arguments discussed in conduct books, similar to Butler’s, in her historical novel *Hope Leslie*. Sedgwick sets this text in seventeenth-century America. However, the issues in the novel are aimed at the nineteenth-century audience. Sedgwick is able to draw the connections between her seventeenth-century plot and her nineteenth-century reader through what some critics call “de-formation of history” (Inkso 180). Her novel asks her reader to think deeply about gender and race equality. Her vocal and willful title character stands in direct opposition to the expectations of women in not only seventeenth-century America, but also in the nineteenth-century. The value of depicting such an exciting heroine is not lost on scholars considering the typical sentimental novels of the time. Nina Baym notes that “Good fiction would strengthen [a woman’s] powers of reason, will and judgment, just as sensational fiction inflamed her uncontrolled feelings and ignorant imagination” (52). Fiction can be empowering for women when the women are depicted with strength. Baym stresses that Sedgwick gives her readers a female character to emulate in her fiction: “These historical romances feature women protagonists and establish the tradition whereby, in the more fanciful setting of a remote time, women are endowed with heroic capacities unrestrained by probabilities” (53). Characterizations like Hope’s were a way of showing women that it could be acceptable to seek adventure even though conduct literature sought to keep them in the domestic sphere.

Modern critics have examined the way in which Sedgwick sets her narrative in colonial America, while still powerfully reaching nineteenth-century audiences. One reason her novel could resonate with her target audience so deeply is the anachronistic nature of *Hope Leslie*. This is explored by Jeffrey Inkso who argues that Sedgwick weaves together a narrative that seems lost in time. Inkso believes that antebellum authors used anachronistic writing as “a way of dealing with both cultural and national identity in a pluralistic culture” (194). Writing in this manner was a way for authors to use the past to work through what is happening in the present. The novel is set in Puritan New England, but Inkso argues that the novel is simultaneously looking at three distinct times: “within the present of the novel’s colonial narrative instance its Revolutionary future is recalled, all from the vantage point of the third decade of the nineteenth century when Sedgwick wrote the novel” (179). Sedgwick creates this reimagining of history to speak directly to her contemporary readers. Sedgwick makes it clear that her characters not only stand in stark contrast to the expectations of the setting they are dwelling in, but also in contrast to the societal norms of the nineteenth century.

Hope seems to be made for adventure and is happy to take control of her own story, while most women of the time would be respected for their docile nature. Sedgwick describes Hope’s characteristic with natural comparisons:

Nothing could be more unlike the authentic, “thoroughly educated,” and thoroughly disciplined young ladies of the present day, than Hope Leslie; as unlike as the mountain rill to the canal – the one leaping over rocks and precipices, sportive, free, and beautiful, or stealing softly on, in unseen, unpraised loveliness; the other, formed by art, restrained within prescribed and formal limits, and devoted to utility. (121)

Sedgwick is making a clear distinction between Hope and her more ladylike counterpart, Esther. Charles Butler shows an example of the more respected behavior and manners in women in his conduct manual. Throughout the book, his philosophy of women's conduct seems clear and his rhetoric is founded in the docility of women, and he insists on the greater good of the passivity in women. He notes the importance of meekness when thinking about female education: "those more quiet women, who have meekly sat down in the humble shades of prose and prudence, by a patient perseverance in rational studies, rise afterwards much higher in the scale of intellect" (159). The language he uses praises those who don't explore engagement with knowledge. The quiet women are held in a much higher regard than those who speak their mind.

Hope shows her independence of mind and thought through the cultivation of her own intellect. The narrator notes that Hope "permitted her mind to expand beyond the contracted boundaries of sectarian faith" (123). Hope opens her mind to exploring more than what the Puritan teachings can provide. She is open to cultivating her own identity and does not feel comfortable conforming to the expectations that are perpetuated around her. Governor Winthrop sees the difference in Hope's behavior and shares the same view of women that society of the nineteenth century had. He discusses this when talking to Mr. Fletcher about Hope's character and general distaste of blind obedience to the Puritan patriarchy. Winthrop tells Fletcher of Hope's misdirection: "I have thought the child rests too much on *performances*; and you must allow, brother, that she hath not, I speak it tenderly, that passiveness that, next to godliness, is a woman's best virtue" (153). Winthrop sees that Hope isn't fitting into the proper model that all women should naturally fit into. Butler, again, has the same views of female behavior and argues

that it is the women who are least informed that speak their minds (163). He founds his argument on sweeping generalizations like,

Thus the weakest reasoners are always the most positive in debate; and the cause is obvious, for they are unavoidably driven to maintain their pretensions by violence, who want arguments and reasons to prove that they are in the right. (164)

He believes that it is the uninformed who voice their opinions, and the quiet passive women are perceived to actually have more knowledge. Hope does not adhere to this perception of how women should behave. Because of her defiance, Winthrop sees the seriousness of Hope's obstinate personality and sends her to stay with his family in Boston in hopes of shaping her personality and behavior.

Hope also broadens her horizons physically throughout the novel. Early, Hope shows the power that nature has played in her development of identity when a group of men are heading to climb a mountain, and Hope says that she wishes to join them: "I urged that our new country develops faculties that young ladies, in England, were unconscious of possessing" (98). Here, she is not only expressing a need for change in conventions, but also building her own philosophy as to why it would be important to change cultural understandings of the needs of women physically. She is showing that in England, women were not expected to go out and explore nature, but in the colonies, this is something that women should consider when surrounded by wilderness.

Hope's physically unladylike behavior is also shown in the scene where her aunt, Mrs. Grafton, reveals that Sir Philip wants to marry her. This clearly fills her with anxiety and forces her to act even more unladylike than normal. Here Sedgwick puts her in contrast with Mrs.

Grafton. She describes the way in which the women are walking saying, “Mrs. Grafton prided herself on a slow, measured step, which she fancied was the true gait of dignity. Hope, on the contrary, always moved as the spirit moved her” (166). In this scene, Sedgwick also makes the comparison of Hope to a deer. In Butler’s conduct manual he considers the best way for women to walk. His concern is mainly for their own health. He concludes what women can seek exercise in the form of vigorous movement, but shouldn’t make this more than a minor activity during the day (66-67). Hope shows that she lives her life vigorously. As the scene shows with Mrs. Grafton, she is sprinting forward while society’s expectations are holding her back.

The culmination of Sedgwick’s narrative and characterizations is the decision Everell must make as to which of the main female characters will be his wife. Sedgwick presents Everell with three possible love interests in the novel. He chooses Hope instead of the Native American Magawisca, or Esther. Esther is the antithesis of Hope, but she fits well into the model of the proper woman according to the nineteenth-century conduct books. She is quiet, and docile. She even warns Hope against her imprudent nature and willingness to voice her opinion: “you do allow yourself too much liberty of thought and word: you certainly know that we owe implicit deference to our elders and superiors; -- we ought to be guided by their advice, and governed by their authority” (180). Esther wants Hope to follow the rules more strictly, so that she can model herself to be more like the image of the perfect lady. With that in mind, it is interesting that Sedgwick chooses Hope to be the wife of Everell. Hope is essentially the exact opposite of what society wants a woman to be, but instead of punishing her, Sedgwick allows this rebel to marry.

At the same time, Esther makes the choice to stay unmarried. As the conduct books of the nineteenth century show, marriage was the ultimate goal for the fairer sex. Sedgwick chose to

end her novel saying, “[...] that marriage is not essential to the contentment, the dignity, or the happiness of woman” (350). Women of the nineteenth century are being told since birth what their role is within society. The conduct manuals serve as guides to help them achieve this goal of running their own domestic bliss, but naturally, this ideal doesn’t appeal to all, and also perpetuates inequality. Butler speaks clearly about the expectations of a wife to be submissive to a husband. He uses quotes from the Bible to defend his argument that women must obey their husbands (190-191). Sedgwick seems to be using the end of her narrative to question these ideals about marriage and gender roles. Hope is an outspoken character who struggles with obedience, and will continue these qualities as a wife. However Esther, the character predisposed to obedience chooses an unmarried life. Sedgwick praises Esther’s choice to stay unmarried as she closes out the novel. Sedgwick goes on to say, “Indeed, those who saw how wide a sphere her kindness shone, how many were made better and happier by her disinterested devotion” (350). Esther can still be the beacon of light that women were expected to be without becoming the head of a household. Although Esther still shows the qualities of the perfect female figure that society was looking for in the nineteenth century, the choice to stay unmarried is a step closer to independence, choice, and equality.

The answer to Hope’s uncharacteristic uniqueness is the environment she is brought up in. Sedgwick admits that someone like Hope growing up to be so fearless may seem unlikely, “[...] but it must be remembered that she lived in an atmosphere of favour and indulgence...an atmosphere of love, that like a tropic climate, brings forth the richest of flowers and the most flavourous fruits” (122). Hope is a product of her surroundings, and Sedgwick is unapologetic for the creation of her bright and adventurous heroine. In this passage, Sedgwick seems to be

preparing for the critics of her characterization of the Puritan heroine, which is a founded concern when looking at critics of the novel upon its publication. *The North American Review* published, "Article IV," a review of Sedgwick's novel in 1828. The anonymous author of the review begins with condescending comments about women writers. The reviewer isn't shocked that a book written by a woman could be so enjoyable to read, "because their influence, in any walks of letters, is almost sure to be powerful and good" (403). The critic sees the merit in Sedgwick's work, but still subtly demeans her by comparing her feat of writing a novel to letter writing, which for many women would be the only time they could enjoy the act of writing. The critic cautions his readers from reading too much into the power of a woman authoring fiction with an uncommonly strong heroine. He also notes, "That some females seem to have forgotten their sex, and to have prided themselves on throwing off their peculiar qualities and adopting the coarser habits of men...But such cases are happily, and as we think, necessarily rare" (410). The critic is thankful that colonial characters like Sedgwick's aren't as common place in his modern society.

In her novel, Sedgwick seems prepared for these criticisms. After describing the adult Hope, she takes a moment to break the narrative to tempt the reader to find fault in Hope: "...from some transactions which we shall faithfully record, that she had faults; but we leave our readers to discover them. Who has the resolution to point out a favorite's defects?" (123). She is asking who among her readers can bring themselves to criticize Hope. This seems to be forethought on the part of the author. Hope does not fit into the mold of the proper lady that is outlined in the conduct manuals of the nineteenth century. Sedgwick likely anticipated that her

characterization of a female character unwilling to follow social norms would be met with staunch disapproval.

Sedgwick uses history in her novel to create a connection to her present. Her nineteenth-century concerns are not lost in her seventeenth-century setting. The author's intended audience would feel the effects of her characterization of Hope. While looking at the ways in which the conduct literature expresses the roles that women should follow, it is clear that Sedgwick purposely created Hope to defy this cultural ideal. Sedgwick puts Hope in contrast with the model of ladylikeness, Esther, to show how constricting the societal expectations were for women. Hope stood as a defiant and willful characterization of what a woman could be, rather than fitting into the role of what society thought a woman should be.

Thirty-three years after the publication of *Hope Leslie*, Elizabeth C. Wright takes her readers on a journey through nature in her treatise *Lichen Tufts: From the Alleghanies* (1860). The women in her piece wear short skirts and explore the wilderness in a very unladylike manner. Wright describes their intentions saying, "We were tired and wanted a holiday, so we went off into the woods, out of the way of finery and etiquette, and conventional rubbish, where we should escape from fashionable twaddle, gossips, and flirts—from humbugs and household botheration, and be free to rest and refresh ourselves at leisure" (1). Wright and her company on the journey looked for a chance to escape the daunting expectations of society and gender norms.

Wright specifically notes the etiquette they wish to flee from. Six years after the publication of Wright's treatise, Arthur Martine published *Martine's Hand-book of Etiquette* (1866), his own collection of rules of conduct. His opening statement to the manual seems to rebuke Wright's argument against the frivolity of etiquette:

Many unthinking persons consider the observance of etiquette to be nonsensical and unfriendly, as consisting of unmeaning forms, practiced by only the *silly* and the idle; an opinion which arises from their not having reflected on the reasons that have led to the establishment of certain rules indispensable to the well-being of society, and without which, indeed it would inevitably fall to pieces and be destroyed (5).

Though Martine's rhetoric points toward possible destruction when ignoring the rules of society, Wright finds growth in exploring the boundless adventure of the wilderness and exiting the constraints of society.

Wright shows her happiness in exploring nature and being away from the confines of society saying, "It was a glorious July day, blue and golden, with the fiery languor of summer's noon, quivering in the heated air, only stirred now and then by a cool breeze winding up the river, like a pure and fresh aspiration in a life of indolence and passion" (17). Her descriptions of the nature take an excited tone and show her thankfulness for being on this journey. Wright notes that she grew up in the wilderness. Similar to Hope's being a product of her surroundings in *Hope Leslie*, Wright's own identity and sense of self was shaped by nature, and she establishes her upbringing as a cause for her love of the outdoors: "I had been absent from [the woods] two years in the west, and had longed with more unspeakable homesickness for the evergreen woods and mountain air, than for home or friends. Among them again I could not afford to waste an atom of their riches" (19). Wright is passionate about nature and her attitude toward the importance of the wilderness shows the deep connection it has to her identity. Though conduct literature champions are very specific way for women to behave, Wright is eager to explore alternatives to societies expectations through nature.

Though the journey is insightful and liberating, Wright notes that it takes the right person to embark on such an expedition: “The members of [their party] must be able to stand fire and water, and be of sterner stuff than dolls or carpet knights are made of...A love of Nature and Adventure, and an indifference to Luxury, we requisite” (13). Wright believes that both men and women can have a love of adventure. Both sexes can harmonize in nature, and stereotypical gender roles can be thrown out the window. This thinking is in contrast to the rhetoric used in conduct literature that maintains inequality. Women and men are explained by the authors of the conduct literature as naturally having separate spheres of interests.

Exploring the wilderness gives Wright and her company a chance to leave society and find growth outside of cultural confines. The women of the group even partake in more manly activities: “When the unsuccessful hunters returned, Elvira took a lesson in shooting at a mark. It was awkward business, though she finally succeeded in taking aim” (17). If the women in the group had stayed home in society, they would not have gotten the chance to explore shooting and would more likely be consigned to only enjoying needlework. This adventure affords the women a chance to develop unique interests and talents outside of domestic expectations. Most of the members of the company take on roles within their group that defy cultural expectations. The people of the group are very willing to perform duties that make them happy and not simply do as they are supposed to do: “I wondered, then, more than ever, where people ever get the absurd notion of talking about ‘refined’ and ‘vulgar,’ or ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ employments” (51). She sees the harmony among her group and does not understand why society would not adopt this way of life. She illustrates the roles the members play noting, “My knives are not more masculine than my forks...the Professor’s cooking as manly as his beard” (51). She continues

through each of the group members making the statement to her reader that there is more fluidity between gender roles than society allows. Conduct books make it clear that each sex has a purpose and there is a line that separates what men and women can and cannot do. Wright wants to explore a culture where men and women can enjoy any activity outside of the expectations of their sex. However, for now, this exploration of gender roles can only happen when on holidays in the wilderness.

For women, Wright also believes that nature can cure any mental ailments. She notes that women “commonly seek refuge in matrimony, only to find themselves called upon to feed instead of being fed” (79). This is clearly in stark contrast to the cultural expectations for women of the time. A conduct writer, Thomas Branagan questions these expectations in his text, *The Excellency of The Female Character Vindicated* (1808), discussing the qualities and roles of women. He sees the power of women’s intellect and asks, “why, in the name of wonder, is the cultivation of the female mind...considered merely as a matter of secondary consideration” (82). Branagan shares Wright’s worries and sees the purpose and worth of education and enlightenment for women. However, the conduct literature of the time uses rhetoric that attempts to empower women by showing only their influence on men and their children rather than their influence on society as a whole. Martine argues in his conduct literature that a woman plays a vital role in the progress of a society through her position as a wife and mother: “Every woman whose heart and mind have been properly regulated is capable of exerting a most salutary influence over the gentlemen with whom she associates” (26). Another example of the “greater good” rhetoric, this shows the commonly held opinion that the worth of a woman’s education is

not found in her direct effect on her community, but found in the influence she has on the men around her who then affect the community.

Botany is, argued by Wright, a productive form of study for women and a way for them to seek knowledge through nature. However, she wants to make it clear that there is a stark difference between floral literature and botany texts. Floral literature could be found in many conduct books during this time. Sections of the manuals would be dedicated to illustrations of flowers and then lists of their names and maybe a note or two about what the flower means. She cautions against the floral literature saying, “If these books, and the counterfeit ‘language’ they teach, had not usurped the place of the beautiful science on which they have grown like parasites, they would not be worth the trouble of chastising” (32). Wright fervently rebukes the notion that floral literature could be compared to botany. Houghton’s etiquette guide *Our Deportment* has a specific section dedicated to “The Language of Flowers.” This is exactly the literature on nature that Wright seems to detest. Houghton’s sugary language describes the pure enjoyment of flowers: “What is more pleasing to our senses than beautiful flowers—their form, their great variety, and sometimes sharp but harmonic contrast of color, and their fragrance!” (375). To conduct writers, flowers are a visual pleasure, but don’t enhance one’s understanding of the world and nature. Furthermore, the illustrations in the floral section of this manual are only of women leisurely exploring man-made gardens and not the wilds that Wright so passionately advocates for. The manual’s section on flowers then only goes on to list pages of flowers and giving arbitrary “meanings” for each. Wright speaks to these definitions saying, “No! Ivy does not say ‘Festivity,’ nor ‘we will not part!’ as those Lexicons tells us, but it says “Old ruins—crumbling walls—and churchyard stones!’ and suggests bats and owls” (32). In the case of

Houghton's text, ivy means "friendship or matrimony" (385) which do not have the same connotation of Wright's much more realistic suggestion of ruins and frightening animals. Daniel Patterson, in his article discussing Wright's treatise, examines the cultural perceptions of women's study in flowers versus botany. Patterson argues that "Wright informs her female readers that they are patronized and deluded by the ridiculous content of the books designed specifically for them by their culture and that they are repelled by the hard science whose goal is simply to classify and control" (41). The conduct literature of the time shows the superficial language that Wright sees women gravitating toward and worries these texts will block readers from ever engaging with a more scientific view of nature.

Wright's final essay in the treatise speaks to the quest for perfection that authors of manuals like conduct books advocate for. Women were expected to achieve perfection in the domestic sphere. However, Wright argues, "In our often arbitrary use of the terms 'good' and 'bad,' 'perfect' and 'imperfect,' we betray a faith, instinctive and unconquerable, in the existence of the positive standard of perfection, to or from which all our comparisons are made" (99). This binary language is an impossible way to expect people in society to behave. In the conduct manuals, goodness is above all what women must seek. Perfection in the home is of the utmost importance, and it is up to the wife and mother to uphold these standards in the domestic sphere. Conversely, Wright believes nature is where society should be going to seek this perfection: "The soul of Nature stretches out her hands in her great yearning towards the better and the higher...her hunger and thirst after perfection proves the existence of a supply suited to her wants" (99). Nature supplies the answer to any being's wants. Though this argument dwells outside of the commercial and material wants that were bubbling to the surface in the nineteenth-

century, these are trivial in comparison to what nature can afford to those who will seek the perfection.

Butler begins his conduct manual with a preface that speaks to perfection. His goal is to guide women in understanding that “the domestic duties to be regarded as ever imperative and inevitable; and the paramount objects of female pursuit to be the attainment of perfection in the characters of a wife, a mother, and a Christian” (viii). For women, perfection can be found only in the home. Her identity is as a mother, wife or Christian and not as a citizen of the world. Her worth is found in how well she can uphold the domestic sphere. Wright notes that the aspiration to perfection is natural, but sees it in a much more progressive light than Butler (110). Her view of perfection defies gender roles. Wright speaks about the perfection sought by humankind.

Where the opinions from conduct book writers and Wright are similar is in the religious aspect of perfection. Both believe that the quest for perfection is guided by religious teachings. However, Wright’s perception of perfection is something that has to happen internally, and Wright uses an anecdote about multiple acorns that were dropped on the ground, but only one received the moisture and sunrays to flourish. Wright says that the other acorns see her budding, and scold her for seeking growth: “But after a time, she stretched out her hands so far to embrace the free air, that her two first leaves, all wrinkled and ridged, spread out in the sunshine, and her feet clung closely to the moist earth, and she stood a living, growing thing” (114). Her description shows the care that goes into self-growth, and reaching truth through inner expansion. The perfection sought in the domestic sphere is truly material, and when perfection is discussed in the conduct literature of the time, it is used in regards to deportment and dress. The quest for perfection does

not lie in one's relationship to material things, as Wright argues, but rather the way one cultivates one's own identity and sense of self.

The authors of the conduct books set standards for women and society. Over time the books become more compartmentalized and reflect a culture with rigid roles for citizens to fill. Women had a specific model to follow that praised passivity and domestic duties above all else. When there is only one way to seek perfection, the imperfection becomes a problem. Sedgwick and Wright show their nineteenth-century readers the alternatives to the model of ladylikeness. Sedgwick pushes the boundaries of the passive, meek, and obedient woman that conduct authors argue for, while Wright explores equality between the sexes and depicts women who explore scientific and natural pursuits outside the confines of the domestic sphere. Together these texts show alternative outlets for self-expression through identities shaped by nature.

CHAPTER IV

THE WIDE, WIDE WORLD AND LITTLE WOMEN: DEVELOPMENT OF IDENTITY THROUGH SOCIAL CONFORMITY

Published in 1850, Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* explores the spiritual development of the protagonist, Ellen Montgomery. The novel focuses heavily on religion and Ellen's struggles with her faith. *The Wide, Wide World* was widely read during the nineteenth century—So much so that even Jo March is seen reading the work in *Little Women*. Ellen's journey is plagued with times of sadness, but she relies on her faith to keep her moving. Warner tests Ellen's faith throughout the novel and Ellen shows herself to be submissive and malleable. Though her identity is firmly rooted in her religious background, her expression of self is dependent on those around her. Ellen's identity cannot begin to develop until she is "alone and free" from the authority figures in her life. Ellen is outwardly malleable by others, which suppresses her ability to develop a true sense of self. Ultimately her moment of self-expression happens when "alone and free" (532).

Ellen's journey as a Christian is the center of this novel and also the core of nineteenth-century conduct literature. Many of the manuals use religious rhetoric to reinforce the message they are presenting. L.G. Abell's *Woman in Her Various Relations* (1855) uses the importance of piety to perpetuate submissive characteristics in women. She notes that "I know not how she can meet her responsibilities in any measure, as she ought, without a deep and abiding faith, and a strong Christian hope" (51). For a woman to perform her domestic duties, Abell argues, she must first be pious and faithful. Abell finishes this section dedicated to the "Importance of Right Principles" saying, "Without religion, she is the most pitiable, the most abject, the most utterly destitute of all created beings The world--society--nay, even domestic life, has nothing to offer

on which her heart in its unregenerate state can rest in safety” (52). A woman cannot succeed in her social and domestic duties unless she is religious. Society’s expectations were for women to fill domestic roles, and lead good Christian lives. The language that conduct literature used doesn’t allow for the two to be separated, which links the female identity with the religious and the domestic.

Conduct literature also stressed the importance of parents’ control of their daughters. Familial obedience is expressed in Matthew Smith’s *Counsels Addressed to Young Ladies and Young Men* (1850). In a section dedicated to women honoring their parents, Smith argues that “curses bitter and enduring have been pronounced upon those who neglect or disobey” (10). This stresses society’s shaming of those who question their parents and do not do as they are told. Smith ends this section noting that he sees women becoming more rebellious: “I regret to record the fact that among young women there is much filial disrespect. Language is used, terms employed, and a temper manifested towards parents” (13). Smith sees young women becoming less compliant and more resistant to their authority figures. Thomas Clark addresses these concerns in a chapter of his conduct book *Early Discipline and Culture* (1855). He emphasizes development of character in young women, but sees this development in “gifts of female grace and beauty, to live among the roses, and to make the landscape gay” (102). Clark sees women as objects to adorn the world and make life joyful for the ones around them. This expectation for women to always be happy and project good feelings oppresses actual development emotionally and mentally.

William Alcott stresses the importance of piety in women in his conduct book, published the same year as Warner’s novel, *Letters to a Sister; or, a Woman’s Mission* (1850). The sections

in the book are addressed to young women who hypothetically are unmarried and still reside in the home. Alcott addresses his concerns regarding women striving to have Christian qualities in the section titled “Moral Character.” He stresses that a woman needs a strong Christian foundation on which she strives to serve God; then “she will do most for herself while laboring most for others” (85). Self-fulfillment for women, according to Alcott, is found through the serving of others. Alcott ends his series of letters with a section dedicated to “Self-Sacrifice” which explains that a woman’s ability to sacrifice her needs for her family should be held in the highest regard (305-306). Alcott continues in this passage to shame women who seek fulfillment of self and put themselves first. He uses an angel analogy to make his argument even clearer for his readers: “It is because she is made to be angelic, and may and ought to become so, that I regret to find any relics of a fallen nature about her, especially one so odious as selfishness” (306). By making women angels here, he connects them deeper with religious beliefs. Women serve to bless men with happy homes and quiet lifestyles, and Alcott argues that women who live to serve themselves are going against Christian doctrine.

Religion is Ellen’s most prominent outlet for expression and is what anchors her sense of identity. Ellen’s depiction relies on her ability to be a good Christian, which goes through different shapes and phases based on who is in her life at the time. Grace and Theodore Hovet note Ellen’s malleability saying, “Ellen’s immediate need is to maintain a sense of being cared for and connected to others” (5). This reliance on others over time shapes Ellen into a dependent character, lacking in control of her own identity. The Hovets describe this as Ellen’s relational identity (5). It is shaped and changed based on the whims and cares of the people she encounters. Isabelle White explores Ellen’s expression of her identity, and argues that Ellen’s depiction

perpetuates anti-individualism. She argues that Warner's novel promotes an opposition to the individual through the emphasis on domestic duty and Christian ideals (31). White also notes that Warner opposes the individual through the praise of female submissive qualities (33). Ellen's submissiveness leads to her ability to be shaped by the people around her. She can be forced into the ideal model of femininity through the cultural expectation that women were meant to be submissive

Ellen's emotional repression is another way that society oppresses her, according to John Seelye. Ellen isn't allowed to express her emotions and must suppress her grief from the beginning of the novel. She is shamed for feeling any emotions when she is taken from her sick mother. Seelye notes that "Ellen will learn that grief is a selfish emotion, that sorrow can only be turned to good use by carrying it to Christ" (98). Ellen is restricted from feeling sadness and must channel her energy into developing her persona as a Christian woman and her relationship to God. This repression is seen from the beginning of the novel, which opens with Ellen's mother telling her that Ellen will be leaving home to stay with her Aunt Fortune. When Ellen becomes emotional, her mother asks her to stop crying: "You will hurt both yourself and me, my daughter, if you cannot command yourself. Remember, dear Ellen, God sends no trouble upon his children but in love; and though we cannot see how, he will no doubt make all this work for our good" (12). Ellen's mother suppresses her daughter's emotions through religious teaching. Her logic is that all events in life are God's will and therefore must be accepted. This stifles any expression of grief for Ellen and forces her to shape her identity through religion.

The Humphreys help Ellen cultivate her pious identity and bring light into her grieving life. While living with her Aunt Fortune, Ellen befriends Alice and John Humphreys. The brother

and sister stand in as a teacher for Ellen academically and morally. Ellen willingly submits to the new authority figures in her life. Her friendship with the siblings helps her become the young woman that society looks for. The narrator notes her character development saying that Ellen's Aunt's disposition "was softened by Ellen's gentle inoffensive ways and obedient usefulness...She was runner of errands and maid of all work" (334). Ellen was learning to fit into the submissive and obedient model that young girls were expected to, which is aided by Alice and John's religious teachings.

Ellen gravitates toward strong authorities and allows herself to be submissive to these figures like her Uncle Lindsay. Ellen learns that her parents' original intentions were for her to live with her family in Scotland, and to fulfill these wishes she moves there, leaving her friends the Humphreys. The narrator notes Ellen's struggle to ever defy her uncle's wishes saying, "She could not help loving her uncle; for the lips that kissed her were very kind as well as very peremptory; and if the hand that pressed her cheek was, as she felt it was, the hand of power, its touch was also exceedingly fond" (510). Ellen loves her uncle because he is a strong authority figure. She fulfills the standard of womanhood outlined by the conduct literature in this way. She is happy to be submissive and to be led by the authority figure in her life.

However, when Ellen is faced with aspects of her uncle's authority she is not comfortable with, she shows signs of seeing her own sense of self hiding deep inside her. One of her uncle's requests is that she call him father and take his last name and give up her identity as a Montgomery. When Ellen meets Lindsay's friend Muller, he asks for her name. She hesitates in saying "Ellen Lindsay," but ultimately says her new name (524). She is conflicted in assuming this new identity and she also does not seem to understand why this is a difficult change for her

to make because “She loved Mr. Lindsay the best of all her relations, and really loved him” (525). She is beginning to process the concept of her own sense of self outside the wills of others. This brings up emotions she is not prepared for: “She went to bed that night with wet lashes” (525). Ellen is encountering a formative moment in her own identity development, but she still needs to work through what this means for her choices in life and her outward expression of this sense of self. Lindsay also appears to be happy to suppress Ellen’s sense of self. He seems frustrated when Ellen hesitates in announcing her name as Ellen Lindsay: “‘Your memory is bad to-night,’ said Mr. Lindsay, in her ear, --‘you had better go where you can refresh it’” (525). Lindsay expects Ellen to move forward with this quick change in her life without resistance. Women were expected to follow their paternal leader as shown in the conduct literature. Lindsay shows in this moment that he cannot tolerate her identity confusion, and she must be willing to adopt these new changes as quickly as her new father sees fit.

Though the Humphreys instill a strong faith in Ellen, she is still outwardly malleable. Her Uncle Lindsay has proven to be relatively unreasonable at times and forces Ellen to go against her beliefs of abstaining from alcohol. After Lindsay pours Ellen a glass of wine, the narrator notes, “The glass of wine looked to Ellen like an enemy marching up to attack her. Because Alice and John did not drink it, she had always, at first without other reason, done the same; and she was determined not to forsake their example” (518). Ellen does not seem to even understand why she doesn’t drink wine. She knows it’s something that the Humphreys do not do, which makes it right in her mind. Though the Humphreys’ decisions and ethics are morally founded, they overpower Ellen’s agency in her own life. Without any understanding of her own identity, Ellen is easily molded by her Uncle Lindsay. After seeing she does not drink the wine,

Lindsay asks Ellen why she won't partake in the alcohol and she responds that she simply doesn't want to drink it (518). This seems to anger Lindsay who aggressively commands her to "Taste it, Ellen!" (518). Ellen does as she is told and does not stand her ground against her unruly uncle. She can't stand up against him because she has no true convictions. She knows what it looks like to be a good Christian and defines herself as such, but when pushed from a force with different ideals like those of her uncle, she caves easily.

This conflict is also brushed aside by John when Ellen explains what happened to her. His response to Ellen's telling him that Lindsay makes her drink wine is, "That is not a matter of great importance, Ellie, provided they do not make you do something wrong" (562). John doesn't see her drinking wine to be any real problem, though he and his sister set the standard for not drinking. Ellen seems to blindly follow anything the Humphreys do and shapes her own sense of self around their actions not knowing whether this is truly a matter of conviction, or simply that they just don't drink wine. Earlier she sees the wine as something to go into battle against, but John does not seem to see wine drinking as important or wrong.

Ellen finally gets a moment of expression when she and the Lindsays are in Edinburgh. Together, they all go to church Sunday morning, but Ellen wishes to go again in the evening. After discussing it with her uncle, he wavers and lets her go alone (532). When Ellen sits down for the church service, she is overwhelmed with emotions and finds herself crying: "now she was alone and free, and she poured out her heart in weeping that she with difficulty kept from being loud weeping" (532). This is Ellen's first moment to express herself freely without the oppression or the influence of others. Her faith and persona as a Christian woman were shaped

by her mother and the Humphreys, but in this moment alone at church, she has true independence and can express her emotions through weeping.

Ellen's true form of expression seems to be more influenced by emotions than anything else. She wants to be the best Christian woman she can be, but wavers and is submissive to the people around her. Her identity is made and shaped by those whom she sees regularly, but it's her emotions that are always consistent. From the beginning of the novel when her mother asks her not to cry, she is being oppressed. However, it's only when she's alone that she can let her tears fall and feel the catharsis of her self-expression. The scene where she cries in the church is monumental because she can express herself freely, but in public. She finally allows herself to cry with people around her and feels no shame for doing so.

Louisa May Alcott did not hide the inspiration for her novel *Little Women* (1868). It was published in two parts and the author used events from her own life to craft the narrative of this classic coming-of-age work. The author noted specially that "Jo's literary and Amy's artistic experiences" were motivated by her life (10). In a time when women were expected to excel in many feminine pursuits while having a gentle, and reserved personality, Alcott presents four unique characters as the March sisters. The author plays with pushing the boundaries of female expectations through semi-conformity, but with resistance through the development of passions and creative expression.

Each of the sisters explores very ladylike endeavors, according to the standards laid out by conduct writers, throughout the novel. Meg's gentility and elegance would have been revered by conduct writers. L.G. Abell notes the importance of outward appearances in her conduct book: "A woman may have many excellent qualities, have a heart full of kindness...but if at the

same time she is not familiar with her duties as a social being, and of that courtesy...she is greatly deficient in the practical duties of life” (91). Even the best women cannot be well-regarded without proper conduct in society, according to Abell. Meg conforms to society’s expectations in this sense. Alcott depicts this when Meg and Jo are getting ready to socialize at a party and noted the pains the girls were going through saying “let us be elegant or die” (67). Alcott’s narrator is poking fun at the conventions that women must struggle through to appear as ladylike as Meg does in society.

Though Jo tends to be more boyish than her sisters, her passion for writing is a much more acceptable expression than her swearing and spitting. Abell discusses women’s writing only in terms of non-fiction, but her expectations of women and writing do venture outside of letter writing. However, William Alcott mentions female authorship explicitly in his chapter “Doing Good with Her Pen.” He cautions, “Should you attempt authorship, you will probably do most good in making Sabbath School books. But be slow and cautious, and adhere as much as possible to matters of fact” (140). Delving into fiction writing the way Jo does would be looked down upon by writers like William Alcott. Jo pushes the boundaries in this sense.

Beth and Amy express themselves through music and art, which were perfectly suitable pastimes for women according to conduct literature. Music, for example, is described in Abell’s conduct book as being a tool for women to use to please others in the home: “Daughters who have felt pleasure in music, because it soothed a father’s feelings...or that has beguiled a mother’s anxieties” (33). The happiness that music can bring to the musician is not found in the creative expression, but in how she can make others content. Abell also notes the importance of cultivating artistic qualities, but still relates the talents to how it can serve the home (77-78).

Abell believes that “The union and blending of colors, as taught in painting, enables one to know what colors best harmonize, and what are best in contrast” (78). The understanding of which colors work well with others can then be used when decorating a parlor, according to Abell. Art and music are not expressed as tools for enlightenment or self-development, but used for maintaining a better home.

Though the novel begins with the eldest March sisters working outside of the home, domestic duties are prioritized for the women of the novel. Meg is a governess and Jo works for their irritable Aunt March. Though neither Meg nor Jo seems fulfilled by the work that they do in their respective occupations, the girls are happy to help provide for their family. As the novel progresses, female occupation is a pervasive topic of consideration for the characters. However, the absence of the topic of female occupations in some conversations forces the reader to consider the concept even more. Mrs. March tells her daughters the many things that she hopes for them in the future but, “To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman” (133). Mrs. March stresses how important it is to marry the right person, but she does not note any wishes that her daughters find a way to express themselves through their unique passions in life. She chooses to place the right marriage at the top of priorities for her children.

Outlets for creativity are very encouraged in the March household. When Jo has one of her stories published, she notes that this is just the start of her career and that she intends to support herself and family with her writing (185). All of her sisters are proud of this accomplishment and encourage her to continue her pursuits. Jo would not have had the chance to pursue this dream had she not been honing her skills as a writer all through her childhood. The

reader is introduced to the March girls' own newspaper publication in the chapter "The P.C. and P.O." The girls take on alter-egos as men in the Pitwick Club, with each girl assuming the identity of a man in the club (134). Though the girls express themselves as writers and show an understanding of filling an occupational role as a writer in society, they still create male personas and see it as a game. However, Jo clearly shows the most interest in the game and ultimately gets her own writing published.

Meg March is nineteenth-century America's perfect woman. She is happy to tend her house, take care of children, marry a good man, and is very concerned with social appearances. Meg is always the sister to make sure Jo is behaving as a young woman should learn to do. When Jo is whistling and Amy points this out as being "boyish," Meg goes on to stress Jo's offenses saying, "You are old enough to leave off boyish tricks, and behave better, Josephine. It didn't matter so much when you were a little girl; but now you are so tall, and turn up your hair, you should remember that you are a young lady" (47). Jo's unladylikeness irritates Meg throughout the narrative.

Meg's story is a clear depiction of an ideal transition from childhood to womanhood according to nineteenth-century expectations. After serving her family by helping around the home and being a governess to help fund their home, she marries Laurie's tutor John Brooke. Together they start a family where Meg runs the home and takes care of their two children, Demi and Daisy. Meg is shown to be a respectable and happy caregiver to her family. When her children are young, Meg struggles with a balancing act of caring for her children and being available to spend time with John. Originally, Meg believes that John is being selfish when he chooses to be away from home at nights while Meg cares for the children. Her mother convinces

Meg that she is the one in the wrong saying, “You have only made the mistake that most young wives makes, --forgotten your duty to your husband in your love for your children” (405). A nineteenth-century wife should above all be subservient to her husband. Meg makes the decision to prioritize her children in this situation. She has grown up a caregiver to her sisters and her identity is steeped in mothering qualities. As a woman of this time, however, she is expected to put the role of wife slightly above that of mother, which she ultimately does.

Jo is the rebel daughter who uses oral and written communication as ways of expressing herself. She has a strong identity and is passionate about being a writer and making sure that her family is well cared for. Descriptions of Jo tend to be masculine, and she expresses that she would rather have been born a boy: “I can’t get over my disappointment of not being a boy, and it’s worse than ever now, for I’m dying to go fight with papa, and I can only stay at home and knit like a poky old woman” (47). Jo would rather be fighting in the Civil War than supporting her country by making clothes for the soldiers. Meg will chastise her for her masculine behavior, but Jo’s expression of this tom-boyish identity is not stifled by her parents. She is encouraged to find self-expression and be her unique self.

However, Jo’s independence comes to an end as the novel comes to a close. Jo explains her plan to experiment with educational traditions for boys in America. When their Aunt March dies, she leaves her vast home to Jo, who intends to turn the house into a school for boys: “a good, happy homelike school, with me to take care of them and Fritz to teach them” (486). Jo has always been more in tune with masculine qualities, and this choice seems natural to her family and Laurie. Jo wants to make a change in the lives of the next generation and so does her husband. Running this school with Fritz would be an acceptable avenue for Jo to explore during

this time. However, she notes that her role in the school will be as caregiver. Throughout the novel she is depicted as pushing the boundaries of female expectations, but ultimately chooses a life as a caregiver, which conforms to societal expectations.

Jo's own inheritance does, however, give her the appearance of independence and helps her achieve the goal of opening the school. She mentions when explaining her motivations that establishing a school for poor boys has always been a dream of hers to fulfill when she is rich: "I told my plan to Fritz once, and he said it was just what he would like, and agreed to try it when he got rich. Bless his dear heart, he's been doing it all his life,—helping poor boys, I mean—not getting rich; that he'll never be" (487). It takes Jo's inheritance of her aunt's estate to see their dream come to fruition. Because Fritz has no money, they can't rely on his own employment to reach their objective. It is Jo's own fortune that makes the goal a reality. Though she does conform to the cultural standard by filling the caregiver role, she rebels by being the financial force in this endeavor.

Beth lacks Jo's fire and confidence in life, but shares the same domestic interests as Meg. Beth left school early due to her shyness and social anxiety, but helps her mother and Hannah around the house during the day. Beth has her own creative outlet, however. She is the musician of the family and expresses herself through playing the piano. Her music is encouraged by her family and her friends. Mr. Lawrence, the Marchs' neighbor, invites Beth to visit his house and play his late daughter's piano. She is shy at first, but builds a strong connection to Mr. Lawrence through her piano playing.

Amy is the only daughter still in school at the start of the narrative. She uses her time in school, however to express her artistic abilities: "Her teachers complained that instead of doing

her sums, she covered her slate with animals; the blank pages of her atlas were used to copy maps on, and caricatures of the most ludicrous description came fluttering out of all her books at unlucky moments” (79). Amy is an artist and the traditional schooling system that she attends on a daily basis suffocates this creativity she is longing to refine. Ultimately, Mrs. March takes Amy out of school and allows her to stay home in a similar manner to Beth. The American education system in place did not allow the unique personalities of the March sisters to flourish. At the end of the novel, Amy is married with a child but still notes that art is an important aspect of her life: “I don’t relinquish all my artistic hopes, or confine myself to helping others fulfill their dreams of beauty” (494). Amy sees her ambitions in art as something that is completely her own and shapes her identity, but ultimately dedicates her time and focus to being a mother and a wife.

Through the character analysis of these sisters, it’s clear that each one cultivated her own unique identity. They each have completely different creative pursuits that help them express themselves individually. However, ultimately, they become mothers and wives. They are caregivers and serve their home as the conduct books expect women to. These sisters are definitely pushing the boundaries by expressing themselves through many different outlets, but Alcott places them in the same domestic sphere as the conduct authors would with the nineteenth-century women of America.

Warner and Alcott show that women have the abilities to cultivate their own sense of self in their novels. Ellen struggles with finding who she is, but finds happiness when alone and free to express her emotions. The March sisters take unique outlets of expression and flourish through the encouragement of the people around them. Ultimately, though, all of these women conform to cultural ideals. Ellen is submissive and dependent on everyone around her. At times, her

identity is even shaped by the people who influence her. Meg, Jo and Amy also end their narrative all wives and mothers. However, this doesn't make the novels conform to ideals, but rather present women with options for how to express their identity while still filling gender norms.

CHAPTER V

THEMATICALLY ESCAPING THE PATRIARCHY IN “THE YELLOW WALLPAPER” AND *THE AWAKENING*

The language of conduct manuals was becoming increasingly more strict and compartmentalized. The manuals of the beginning of the nineteenth century were more speculative and in essay form, while the manuals of the latter part of the century were broken up into hundreds of sections with information ranging from how to address a condolence letter to how to dye one’s hair. Following the American Civil War, etiquette and conduct literature was becoming more widely produced (Schlesinger 27). The increasing strictness of etiquette in the American home can be traced to the emergence of the leisure class. Arthur M. Schlesinger notes that “The owners of these regal fortunes—or, more accurately, their wives—helped to set the social pace of the times” (28). Though it was mainly men writing the conduct books, the women of the upper class at the end of the century wanted to set standards for the new-money families that were becoming more common. The expectations for women to run the home were clear in these very precise manuals and there was little room for women to find autonomy in society. Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Kate Chopin depict female characters that are caught in the rigid confines of their culture but longing to break out and express themselves. In Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the narrator is prescribed rest to help her ailments, but ultimately goes insane to escape the patriarchy. Chopin’s Edna, the protagonist of *The Awakening*, continually fails to find fulfillment in her limited opportunities in the nineteenth-century American society. Both authors use these characters to show women stripped of identity and the consequences of the societal expectations.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was an author and activist for women's rights in a time when their voices were frequently going unheard in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Judith Allen chronicles Gilman's feminist pursuits and remarks that "She was dubbed 'the ablest woman in the United States....Whatever she says is bound to be listened to'" (2). She fervently fought for women's suffrage, the abolition of regulated slavery and worked to legalize birth control for women. Her work was done with the purpose of ending the subordination of women. Gilman fought for a world where women and men could be equals and a society where women could venture out of the domestic sphere (3).

The theme of gender equality in Gilman's life can be seen quite significantly in her research of the sexes historically. Gilman conducted her research with Darwin's evolutionary theories in mind. She argued that "Until the historical moment when men took over, mothers ruled the world. Human tribes centered on the needs of mothers and children" (Allen 78). The purpose of the man was to serve the women and children in this historical interpretation that Gilman argued. This image of a gynocentric world was, however, not what Gilman had in mind for the future. Through her research and her understanding of evolution, she saw that historically, humans are ever-changing. From new technological advances to political systems, the human race was not static. Gilman believed that the next change that had to be made was for equality among genders and for women to escape the patriarchy (Allen 76).

The nineteenth century was beginning to draw to a close when Charlotte Perkins Gilman published her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" in 1892. Gilman's narrator is a wife and mother who has been ill, and whose physician husband, John, has prescribed her with rest to promote healing. Gilman gives her readers a narrator who desperately wishes to get better and fit

back into her role of domestic duties. Initial reviews of the short story placed it in the genre of horror. Reviews focused on the Gothic nature of the narrative (Delashmit 232).

Gilman claimed that the story was more of a reflection of her experience with the rest cure. This was a form of therapy for women developed by Silas Weir Mitchell (Dock 23). Mitchell believed that his rest cure could alleviate the hysteria that women were diagnosed with. This theory is founded in his belief that hysteria is caused by anemia and that rest and isolation from society were the key to curing the hysteria (Cervetti 89). Nancy Cervetti notes that Mitchell argued there was a connection between healing the mind and body: “To cure the body, to make it fat, flush and rosy, would at the same time cure any mental disease” (90). Though his intentions may seem noble in attempting to save women, his cure was largely influenced by the patriarchal system with men controlling the living conditions of women. Mitchell did not want his patients to educate themselves in any way. Cervetti argues that this signals “his desire and determination to maintain a radical sexual difference” (91). Mitchell’s cure for unhappy women was subordination rather than individuality. Gilman’s character is prescribed only rest and is driven insane from her lack of activity and human contact. Gilman had hoped that the message of her short story would be powerful enough to reach the doctors using similar methods as Mitchell and illustrate the adverse effects of his rest cure (92).

With the rest that Mitchell was prescribing, he also denies his patients the ability to write. Gilman notes that this aspect of her experience with the rest cure is what nearly drove her insane (Cervetti 92). Mitchell did not think that writing would help the women get back to their original status as wives. Cervetti argues that “In inhibiting women’s voices, in restoring their bodies but silencing their minds, Mitchell contradicted his own theory of the body and mind as

one and in some cases created the very hysteria he intended to cure” (92). Mitchell’s purpose was to save women, but he was only further oppressing them. He was adhering to the common ideals of the day that women should be submissive and pure. Cervetti notes that Mitchell saw “the ideal woman as pre-eminent for affection, sympathy, devotion, duty, self-denial...and was highly critical of those who fell short of this ideal” (92). There was a singular image of what a woman could be, and Mitchell used his research to desperately squeeze women into this model of womanhood that was not their size. This image is perpetuated by the ideals set in conduct books. The rules of conduct and etiquette are unflinchingly rigid and Mitchell wanted his patients to obey the standards of society.

Mirroring Mitchell’s rest cure, a piece of contraband that Gilman’s narrator attempts to hide from her husband is paper. She writes to let her feelings out, though John forbids her to write. This is a reflection of the societal perception of women who write at the time. The narrator hides her writing from her husband: “There comes John, and I must put this away, --he hates to have me write a word” (9). John is the oppressive force keeping his wife from expressing herself. The narrator later writes, “And I know John would think it absurd. But I MUST say what I feel and think in some way – it is such a relief!” (17). Her only way of expression is through her hidden writing. Although John believes he is doing what is best for his wife by keeping her locked in a room to wallow in her sadness, he is actually driving her into depression. In the same vein, John is also disregarding the narrator’s own opinion of her health. He is taking control over her body and making the decisions on his own in regards to what is best for her.

Gilman uses comparisons of the narrator to a child to further draw the reader’s attention to the treatment of women. The narrator must rest in the nursery of the ancestral home. This

imagery holds great significance for the role of the narrator. Lorelee MacPike notes the setting arguing, “The fact that the narrator’s prison-room is a nursery indicates her status in society. The woman is legally a child; socially, economically, and philosophically she must be led by an adult – her husband” (287). Within the patriarchy, the narrator has no more rights than a child. Especially because she is ill and must rest, she is seen as defective. The bars on the windows are significant in symbolizing her being frozen in this state of childhood. If the narrator would be allowed to leave the house and make choices for herself, she would leave this state and move into true adulthood (287). The narrator cannot escape the confines of the room, because she is being held there by her husband’s oppressive forces.

John continually silences his wife by simply not listening to her requests. He does not see that she needs to express herself and has the ability to make her own decisions about her health. She pleads with her husband to leave for a short time, “I tried to have a really earnest reasonable talk with him the other day, and tell him how I wish he would let me go and make a visit to Cousin Henry and Julia. But he said I wasn’t able to go, nor able to stand it after I got there” (17). The narrator is immediately silenced when she tries to make a suggestion to her husband. John makes the decisions about her health and well-being and she must obey his wishes.

The relationship between the narrator and her husband is strained, but the narrator continues to trust John throughout her narrative. Marjean D. Purinton explores this marital relationship in a spatial sense. She says,

Marital relationships are figured by spatial dimension that define and confine women...[the] wallpaper is a space of containment, a place the narrator’s husband has recommended of her for a “rest cure,” for reconditioning her incipient “feminist”

inclinations so that she is returned to her “proper” place in the “compulsory” heterosexual relationship. (97)

The narrator is trapped in this space that her husband will not allow her to leave. Much like Mitchell, John wants to cure his wife from her hysteria, and give her the strength to return to her position as wife and mother. Purinton also discusses the effect that the sheer isolation from community is having on the narrator. John will not allow her to see any of her friends or family for comfort (97). This spatial confinement becomes dangerous when outside, positive female forces are not permitted to enter.

The narrator loses herself in the wallpaper because she has no outlet of expression in her confinement. The wallpaper is deceptive and cryptic for the narrator and Purinton argues, “Reading Gilman’s narrator’s reading of the wallpaper and her efforts at writing about her reading uncover ways in which women were oppressed and repressed in...heteropatriarchal relationships struggle to communicate” (102). There is a greater understanding to be had about what the wallpaper is when considering how the narrator sees it. As the narrator sinks further into her insanity, she wants to decipher the wallpaper and seeks a deeper understanding of what is inside the wallpaper. The narrator sees figures in the wallpaper and thinks of it as a living being: “Then I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor. It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All those strangled head and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!” (31). The narrator sees creatures shrieking; and being strangled, much like she is, the figures in the wallpaper are trapped and miserable. This fuels her need to peel the wallpaper and free them from their prison. The narrator then goes on to say, “I don’t like to LOOK out of the windows even – there are so many of those creeping women, and

they creep so fast. I wonder if they all came out of the wallpaper as I did?" (31). The narrator now believes that she was once in the wallpaper. She was trapped inside and has broken free. She knows that she needs to return at night, but she revels in the freedom of being outside of her wallpaper confines. The narrator is not allowed to express herself in any way and the rest is driving her insane. She uses the imagery of the wallpaper to step outside of her prison.

The depiction of the narrator stuck in the wallpapered room is also a commentary on the patriarchy. Society has specific expectations and the conduct manual *Our Department* explains the importance of women's roles in the home. The authors argue that the "Home is the woman's kingdom and there she reigns supreme. To embellish that home, to make happy the lives of her husband and the dear ones committed to her trust, is the honored task which it is the wife's province to perform" (208). It is the duty of the women to keep the home a happy and well-run production. Because the narrator was too ill to perform her womanly duties, she must be put in a room to do nothing until she gets better. As the authors of *Our Department* argue, a woman's duty is to the home, and when the narrator cannot fulfill these duties, her function in life is lost according to nineteenth century American culture. and when this character cannot do this, her function is lost. Margaret Delashmit also explores the role of the patriarchy arguing that Gilman depicts the "deformed state of womanhood under patriarchy" (220). As the time progresses and the narrator is trapped in the patriarchy, she is falling apart mentally. She is an illustration of what happens to women who are oppressed and not given the freedom to have self-expression.

After creating a character that cannot perform her duties in the home, Gilman shows that her only escape from the patriarchy, and the confines of social expectations, is to go insane. The narrator is trapped in the room by her husband. This room serves as a prison, with its actual bars

on the windows. John has taken control of everything about the narrator physically. McKinzie L. Shannon reflects on this prison that John has created, and goes on to discuss the emotional hold that John is not able to keep over the narrator. Shannon argues that the only freedom that the narrator is able to sustain through her own emotional conflicts. She also argues that, “The result of [the narrator’s] isolation was not what John had hoped and, in fact, gave [the narrator] the opportunity to separate herself from her husband and obtain an identity that was not previously constructed for her” (21). When the narrator is driven insane, she is able to seek this new identity. The narrator sees a woman in the yellow wallpaper lining her walls. This woman is waiting to break free from the confines of the room. MacPike also notes the woman that the narrator is struggling to rescue, saying, “The rescue of that woman becomes her one object, and the wallpaper becomes at once the symbol of her confinement and her freedom” (288). When the narrator can reach this other woman and rescue her, she can rescue herself from the patriarchy and reclaim her own identity.

The narrator is finally liberated from the confines of cultural expectations when she goes insane. Delashmit explores the insanity of the narrator arguing that the narrator is, “Conditioned by her culture to be submissive to her husband and other male members of her family, she acquiesces to his judgments and proclamations on one level, but at a deeper level, she rebels” (220). The narrator rebels against the patriarchy when she falls into madness. She frees the woman behind the wallpaper and believes that she was the one behind the wallpaper: “I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard! It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!” (31). Gilman’s narrator has escaped the wallpaper and has escaped the patriarchy, but could only do so through insanity. She can

creep around her room all she wants, and is now unable to serve her husband and the patriarchy as a proper wife.

The patriarchy that Gilman's narrator objects to is fueled by the household image that conduct books illustrate. Newton argues that the common rationalization for female oppression was that women have a natural predisposition for domesticity, therefore there was no reason to encourage women to take part in political issues outside of the home (82). This kind of thinking is encouraged by conduct book writers who praise women's duties. Not only do the authors make no suggestion that women should venture outside the home, they also argue that women should enjoy the fact that they are doing something meaningful by molding the minds of the future (Newton 83). Daniel Wise is an example of an author who showered women with praise for their domestic duties. He says in his conduct book *The Young Lady's Counsellor* (1851) that "Everything has its appointed sphere, within which alone it can flourish. Men and Women have theirs. They are not exceptions to truth, but examples of it. To be happy and prosperous, they must abide in them" (92) However, Gilman's short story clearly questions these arguments. She doesn't praise the sphere, but presents it as a prison.

Reputation was surely a factor in John's choice of taking his wife out of the public eye. Instead of treating her in their own home, where neighbors might see her, he takes her to an ancestral home with only the company of him and his sister. This method of treatment was common, but it still suggested that the narrator was not fitting into the model of a nineteenth-century wife. Gilman shows how these models were harmful, but the writers of the conduct books, that encouraged the perpetuation of the standards, thought they were doing what was best for society (Newton 96). By holding society to these standards, and with the punishment of a

ruined name or reputation, there was little chance of the readers of conduct books questioning the norm.

The madness that Gilman's narrator suffers from can be read as being induced by an oppressive society, but the narrator also is driven insane by simply being locked within herself for so long. The conduct books of the time had specific rules that women needed to follow to fit into her society. As a result, women had little chance to find their true identity. They knew who society wanted them to be, but had no idea who they truly were. When the narrator is locked in her room, she sees herself creeping inside the walls and frees herself from the confines only to be left insane. Gilman presents a cautionary tale of a woman who finds herself and escapes the patriarchy through insanity.

Another cautionary tale, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) depicts depression and lack of fulfillment in a woman stationed in the upper leisure class. This is a cautionary tale asking society to consider the expectations placed on women during this time. Edna falls in love with a youthful and stimulating Robert while married with children. Chopin depicts the pains that result from the constraints on a woman who does not fit into the mold of a perfect mother and wife. While looking at the language in conduct literature from the end of the nineteenth century, it is clear that the rules for women to follow had become even more precise and strict. Edna cannot fit into these rigid expectations for a woman, and seeks untraditional forms of self-expression. After realizing that the only acceptable identity for a woman of this time must be shaped by her domestic duties, Edna frees herself from the oppression through suicide.

When Edna and her family return to their home in New Orleans, she finds it hard to adhere to her normal wifely duties. As the woman of the house, one of her duties is to be home

once a week for friends and women around the town to call on her. This system of “calling” would have been common and an understood system for nineteenth-century American readers. *American Etiquette* discusses the strict rules of the calling practice. The authors note that it is customary that women choose a day for receiving guests and this differs from location to location. However, the most well-bred women “will receive callers whenever they come” (129). Some women can aspire to be as social, but it could be too strenuous for women like Edna, who are reluctant to continue the custom of calling. The list of expectations in this section are overwhelming and divided into over forty more sections discussing what to do and what not to do when calling or being called upon.

Edna chooses to ignore her callers by leaving the house, which angers her husband, Leonce. He tells Edna, “I should think you’d understand by this time that people don’t do such things; we’ve got to observe *les convenances* if we ever expect to get on and keep up with the procession” (249). Leonce sees the social merit in his wife’s receiving callers throughout the day. They are keeping up appearances in their circle. The conduct manual *Our Deportment* shows the reader exactly what should be done if a woman will not be present to take calls. A lady, the authors instruct, must make it clear to her callers that she is not home, and must promptly send regrets to all who attempted to visit while she was gone (61-62). Edna chooses not to be home and leaves no message for her callers. She is reluctant to adhere to these incredibly strict expectations for the lady of the house. Kathleen M. Streater notes that Edna reacts to her husband’s annoyances typically with silence: “we can speculate that, because all language is masculine, Edna has no language by which to express an authentic feminine expression and thus she remains silent” (410). Edna chooses to stay silent while her husband’s chides her for not

upholding her duties as the lady of the house, but she also chooses silence in regards to these duties. She leaves no messages for her callers.

After Leonce explains his frustration with Edna's conduct as the lady of the house, she goes to visit her friends the Ratignolles. They serve as the model couple and show her that she and her husband will not find this type of coexistence in their life, partially because domestic fulfillment is not what Edna is truly seeking. After leaving the Ratignolles, "Edna felt depressed rather than soothed... The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling hopeless ennui" (258). Edna has no options in life. The fulfillment that women would have had was only sought through marriage and motherhood. After watching the Ratignolles, she knows that she will never have a relationship like that with her husband. She is unwilling to submit to his needs, and wants more than keeping the domestic sphere clean and tidy. The Ratignolles fit into the model of expected companionship. *American Etiquette* dedicates a section of the conduct manual to the expectations of a couple. The authors note, "If one should have tastes and inclinations to which the other is averse, they should not be obtruded. In matters where conscientious conviction is not involved, each should willingly yield to the other" (38). The authors argue that both the husband and wife should be willing to see their partner's interests and outlooks, but the Pontelliers are both unwilling to change for the other spouse.

Edna's lack of fulfillment can also be seen in her reluctance to be a mother. The narrator notes that Edna "was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them... Their absence was a

sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself” (198). She has been forced into this life by society and cannot routinely muster the ability to be a mother. She does not fit into the model of the perfect wife and mother, and would rather find fulfillment elsewhere. This becomes a problem when looking at the conduct rhetoric. *American Etiquette* uses the “greater good” rhetoric to stress that it is the domestic sphere that has the most influence on children: “The *home* is the most powerful and really the most effective institution on earth for training the rising generation” (23). Women are in charge of domestic conduct, and thereby influencing the next generation. Edna does not fit into the role as a mother, and cannot influence her children in the way society expects of her.

Streater wishes to look more closely at Chopin’s treatment of the Ratignolles and specifically Adele Ratignolle. She is depicted as the ideal wife and mother who easily fills the role as the domestic angel. Streater argues that it is Ratignolle’s choice that makes her a feminist character: “she forges her resistance from behind and within masculine parameters, manipulating the male-defined border of her identity as wife and mother, at once being and contesting the patriarchal ideals” (406). Early in Edna’s descriptions, Chopin makes it clear that “Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman” (181). While the narrator promptly describes Adele saying, “There are no words to describe her save the old ones that have served so often to picture the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams” (182). Adele is the ideal, perfect women that the conduct books describe, but Streater argues that Chopin is mocking this idealized conception of motherhood: “Chopin reveals how women are being defined by a male construct of motherhood that not only denies their individual identity, but also continually reinforces a sense of inferiority, for what woman can measure up to the standard of an ‘angel?’” (407). Most

conduct books were written by men, and this angel that Streater notes is unattainable for many women.

While Edna seeks fulfillment, Madame Reisz is happy in her alternative lifestyle. Peter Ramos discusses her agency as an artist. Because of this, “Madame Reisz is not expected to marry. Furthermore, she does not act or appear lady-like or even polite; she speaks her mind, even in public” (148). Madame Reisz can live slightly outside the confines of society living unmarried and without children. The implications, however, are that if a woman were to choose the life of an artist, society would not allow her to be a mother-woman like Adele. Chopin presents both Madame Reisz and Adele as depictions of womanhood that a woman could seek to fulfill, but no woman could ever be both.

Though Edna seems to be seeking an alternative and some sort of agency, when she achieves it, she is still left lacking. After purchasing her own home and leaving her husband, Edna hopes to feel some autonomy in completing this feat. However, “she sat there amid her guests, she felt the old ennui overtaking her; the hopelessness which so often assailed her, which came upon her like an obsession, like something extraneous, independent of volition” (309). Though Edna had bought the house, prepared the party, and invited her guests on her own, she still has not found fulfillment. Peter Roma presents a way to think about Edna’s difficulty finding happiness: “What Edna longs for is not so much freedom...as meaning—which, increasingly for Edna, involves not selfhood but the unattainable yet always longed-for love” (152). Edna cannot be happy without Robert, and a relationship with him is unattainable. This is due in part to Robert’s removing himself from Edna’s life, but also because their relationship would defy societal norms.

Edna shows signs of depression throughout the novel. The narrator notes her internal conflicts saying, “There were days when she was unhappy, she did not know why—when it did not seem worth while to be glad or sorry, to be alive or dead, when life appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly toward inevitable annihilation” (261). Her view of life in the domestic sphere is dismal and hopeless. Chopin even evokes similar imagery to the descriptions in Gilman’s short story. Both Edna and the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper” fall into mental instability fueled by the expectations from society. The narrator goes on to describe Edna’s state of mind: “It was not despair, but it seemed to her as if life were passing by, leaving its promise broken and unfulfilled. Yet there were days when she listened, was led on and deceived by fresh promises which her youth held out to her” (285). Edna seems to have difficulty understanding her feelings and a way to resolve these feelings of hopelessness. In this moment the narrator shows that she had aspirations in her youth, but her current life is not the one that she wanted.

Like the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Edna seeks an escape from her life and her struggle with societal expectations. When Edna realizes she can never be with Robert, and she will never fit as a perfect wife and mother, she swims out to sea and commits suicide. As she is swimming the narrator states, “She thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (351). Edna sees accepting motherhood and wifely duties as giving up herself to her family. She is unwilling to do this, and to her, society does not offer any solutions other than taking her own life. Both Gilman and Chopin present not only cautionary tales, but also the tragic ways to escape the strict expectations of society. The authors are cautioning the readers against the female oppression and

the expectation that women fit into one role for society. Ramos even notes that “Both texts repeatedly establish the extent to which the patriarchal pressures of that period posed severe obstacles for even the most privileged women” (145). These patriarchal pressures are maintained through the language and rhetoric in conduct literature. Women had little agency in their own lives, and could only expect to find fulfillment in domestic duties. Chopin and Gilman show what happens when women cannot fit into this “one-size fits all” model that conduct literature perpetuates.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Trends of Women's Literature and Conduct Literature Examined

During the nineteenth century, conduct literature goes through major transformations. As the century progresses, the manuals become stricter and show concerns in making a woman's purpose clear. With that, the women's literature being published seem to push harder against societal norms as the century moves forward. The conduct writers are attempting to wrangle women into the domestic sphere more fiercely, while female authors make their voices more prominent. When historical context is considered, a trend emerges where the conduct writers seek to create stricter rules of conduct and stifle the formation of identity outside of the domestic expectations. To this trend, women writers responded with female protagonists who continue to push the boundaries of social norms more and more as the century progresses.

Organization for American women's rights activists start assembling shortly after the revolutionary war (Boylan 15). Before the war, Anne Boylan notes that a woman's influence politically was through her husband. However, through the development of these organizations, during the beginning of the nineteenth-century, "Organizations could make [their] concerns audible in public forums and policy debates" (136). Conduct writers are consistent throughout the century arguing that a woman's power is through those she influences, and not through making change herself. Philemon Halstead Fowler notes in *Woman's Sphere of Usefulness* (1859) the ideal woman is one that "showed no disposition to take the lead, and no determination to have her own way—nothing like dictatorial or domineering spirit. She preferred that others should be gratified rather than herself, and that others, rather than she, should have the sway"

(37). This passive and submissive woman is not a characterization that can be bestowed on most of the women taking part in the political organizations concerned with women's rights. It seems that conduct authors are seeing the winds changing and women rising up from the domestic sphere looking for something more in the public realm of change. Conduct writers also do not discuss the political organizations that were present for women to take part in since the birth of the United States.

The pressure for woman's rights can be seen in the conduct literature when authors examine women working outside of the domestic sphere. Margaret Sangster answers the question: "Shall the Wife be a Breadwinner" in her conduct book *Life on High Levels* (1897) with a resounding no. She shows that the wife has too many duties in the home to ever think about exploring any occupation:

If the wife be the mother of little children, if she be even partially an invalid, if there is no need that her exertions shall increase the family income, if her taking on her shoulders the labor of partially supporting the household means that she shall be overworked and borne down with care, then let her hesitate long before she accepts such a task. (161).

Sangster shows the shame that a woman would feel if she attempted to leave the home to work for her own fulfillment and to express a different identity than just that which is related to all things domestic. This is an obvious remark to the women seeking equal rights among men and a chance to have an occupation outside of motherhood and wifedom. Sections of conduct books written in the early part of the century were more focused on women's morality and didn't pose questions about women working. It was not until women's rights activists brought this topic to the forefront that conduct writers found this as something to consider or instruct on.

In his *Womanhood Lectures* (1894), R. Heber Newton directly opposes the women's rights movement. He compares society to an organism that cannot live without strong families, and to have strong families, women must stay home (57-8). He places the burden of the country's success on women's shoulders in hopes to deter women from joining the movement for equality. He continues by separating the purposes of men and women saying, "Domestic economy will lay the foundation of a sound political economy, and man will prove in the outer world the masterful law-ward, or lord, when in the inner world woman is the mistress law-ward or lady" (58). An effective economy and society starts in the home, according to Newton. By putting such an emphasis on the success of the home, Newton attempts to convince women that their influence on society is through the way they raise the next generation and how well they run their home.

Sarah Newton argues that the lack of feminism in conduct literature is logical when considering the purpose of the manuals. She notes, "Feminism seems opposed to true womanliness and becomes a threat to the natural interconnectedness of gender relations and roles" (93). It's important to conduct writers that the definitions of a man's purpose and a woman's stays separate. Fowler chose to open his conduct book with language that separates men and women saying, "The sexes are designed for different spheres...the distinction in the nature and organization of the two, unequivocally denotes that a peculiar province is designed for each" (5). The author employs rhetoric to further perpetuate the ideal that women are destined, or made to stay within the domestic sphere. By remarking that gender roles are founded in nature, he is pushing the blame on something more God-given than cultural norms generated

by society. By establishing his rules of conduct in nature, he fixes his rules and makes them appear unchangeable by humankind.

Just as the conduct writers responded to pushes for women's rights, women writers crafted characters and situations to reflect the strict cultural expectations. To this oppressive rhetoric, authors responded with characters who could not fulfill the cultural expectations. Rowson and Tenney began the exploration of female identity with cautionary tales about women who become victims of a patriarchy that stifles the development of a female sense of self and strips women of the chance to make their own choices. As the century progressed, conduct authors continued to argue that women should be weak and passive, Sedgwick gave her readers Hope Leslie, an outspoken woman ready for adventure, and Wright showed that the boundaries of gender norms are flexible when in nature. Alcott and Warner show in their novels that women can still express themselves individually while conforming to cultural ideals. When the conduct rhetoric that told women their life and purpose is to serve their children and husband, Chopin gave her readers Edna Pontellier who was unwilling to give her identity to her family and Gilman responded with a narrator so stripped of self-expression she was a prisoner in her own bed. These authors saw the cultural perceptions of what conduct writers argued a woman should be and expanded their literature to explore what a woman *could* be. They opened the scope of womanhood to accommodate the multitude of personalities, characteristics, and desires that a woman might have. It is not surprising that so many conduct writers suggested that girls look away from novels, when considering the role models that were waiting for them in the women's literature of the time.

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