RICE UNIVERSITY

SELF (RELIANCE) AND FEMININE DESIRE

STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGEMENT IN LITERATURE(S) WRITTEN BY WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

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Fictional and nonfictional texts by Elizabeth Stoddard, Edith Wharton, Catherine Maria Sedgwick, Ellen Glasgow, and Zora Neale Hurston are read against the background of Emersonian ideals of self reliance and friendship. The close readings have discovered a number of strategies for creating an individual feminine consciousness and for creating space for both the play of self-reliance issues and feminine desire. By thinking in terms of strategies, readers more fully engage with these elements and open the readings of each of the texts. No “ideal” reading may be determined; rather there are many and complex moments in which self reliance and desire get to be played out to different levels of success.

Stoddard employs complex mother-daughter relationships, witch markers, the theology of the Puritan past, and first-person narration as strategies to represent two strong female characters (two sisters) as they move into the realm of independence and face their own desires (The Morgesons). Wharton finds that letter writing and self-created definitions of friendship allow both herself and her character, Charity Royall in the novel Summer, to act upon desires not morally sanctioned by their societies. The use of typology and direct address to multiply the possibilities of feminine selves and feminine desires, both profound and profane, is Sedgwick’s technique in Hope Leslie.
The reversals of masculine and feminine qualities as well as reversals of behavior in Glasgow's novel *Barren Ground*, make the best readers uncomfortable enough to look at their own narrow definitions of what it means to be self-reliant and female and which desires are worth pursuing. Finally, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* moves like waves, contracting and expanding, as she explores the power of the storyteller and the incredibly important role of the listener (reader). She, more than most, will not allow solid ground under our reading feet, but shifts the Florida mud so that every reading is aware of its immediacy and its contingency.

The examination of how different female authors engage issues of desire and the development of a creative, independent self greatly opens our understandings and readings of these texts.
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Self (Reliance) and Feminine Desire

Strategies for Engagement in Literature(s) Written by Women

Introduction

This project was designed to examine the interrelationships between constructing a female self (at some level of independence) and engaging feminine desire. I was particularly interested in looking at how women writers handle these interactions in both fiction and nonfiction. As I became involved in the project it became clear to me that my contribution, what this project brought out, was a recognition of patterns or strategies for representing feminine consciousness and feminine desire. Each author offered different strategies. There is no assertion here that these were always conscious strategies, for I cannot consult with the authors for any verification. The value of examining these texts in light of strategy, however, is that it opens up the readings of representations of contingent and shifting selves and their contingent and shifting relationship to desire.

As I approached this project, I positioned myself primarily within the realm of feminist criticism in that I am most interested in constructions of feminine consciousness and issues of feminine desire. Further, I am most interested in examining these two things in literature (fiction and nonfiction alike) written by women and constituted in women characters. In this paper, I rarely use the term “patriarchal” as the space of domination which women must resist. I have limited my use of the term because it seems overused and also seems to indicate in feminist criticism a space which only dominates women. For me, it is that amorphous space created by both men and women as actors/agents at the same time that it is a space that limits their abilities to be
free/independent actors/agents and a space in which they must take on the polarities (and
instabilities) of the conservative and the resistant. It plays the roles of constitutor and
constitution at the same time. Nonetheless, however seldom I voice it, it is an important
term within the history of feminist criticism and has its place in discussing the issues I
pursue throughout this project.

This project began simply (or not so simply) as an inquiry into the
interrelatedness of self-reliance and desire, as written in/on female characters by female
authors. I originally conceived of it as the impact of desire upon self-reliance, which
means that I thought of self-reliance as having a prior position acted upon by desire rather
than desire existing first. As I discovered, the construction of a self which relies on the
self is often founded upon desire, so from the first my terms were slippery in their
sequence or simultaneity and in their impact(s) upon each other.

I began essentially with the idea of Emersonian self-reliance\(^1\) and knew from that
beginning that that posited something more specific and more contested than the safer
(only somewhat) terms of American individualism. Although I do not choose to limit
myself to Emerson’s version of self-reliance neither do I want to shed his influence on
my readings of literature. The most valuable image from his essay “Self Reliance” is the
“transparent eyeball” because of what it attempts to say about the process of knowing.
Much of the criticism I have read on Emerson is much more likely to discuss the
influence upon him of his reading German philosophers rather than his reading in Eastern
philosophy, in particular the Bhagavad Gita. I found it fascinating, however, to see just
how often references to the Geeta (as he spelled it) appeared in his journals. And my
fullest sense of understanding the image of the “transparent eyeball” is tied to my own
readings in the Bhagavad Gita, as well as other texts in the Vedantic tradition. The transparent eyeball image is about another way of "seeing" ("knowing"), one which Emerson privileges over the five ordinary senses. In my reading it is completely resonant with the "third eye" of Eastern thought, the site of higher knowledge or "inner seeing."

Self-reliance, then, appears to come from trusting this inner process of knowing more than processes which rely solely on the other five senses or upon the influence of others. It isn’t that knowledge does not come from these sources, but rather that the final arbiter of wisdom garnered from the often conflicting messages of our senses or others’ understanding must be that inner self. The inner self, further, is essentially transcendent, above the ego as it is above the senses. Now, in practice, what would this look like and how might a decision based on inner wisdom but which contradicts ordinary wisdom look different than just average foolhardiness? I don’t know. Nonetheless, I want to start with the seed of this idea.

Ralph Waldo Emerson never really vocalized this inner knowing as the realm of women; he seemed to feel that most philosophy was primarily a masculine field, remaining uncomfortable even with his own experiences of women who dwelt there with him (Margaret Fuller comes to mind). And I never get the sense that overturning traditions and standards of decorum is considered an appropriate action for the female sex. Yet I also feel no barrier between his ideas and women’s engagement of them; at the same time I do not argue direct influence. Self-reliance was a manifest issue in American literature(s) from the beginning of our written records. We do not have to wait for Emerson’s publication in 1832 to be able to use the term. In Thomas Jefferson’s writing in our Declaration of Independence and in Thomas Paine’s Common Sense, we hear self-
reliance ringing forth as the position from which the common people could create arguments that broke with centuries of tradition. The Puritans and other religious groups which came to America were already practicing a constitution of a self, in their case reliant on an “angry God,” that repudiated institutions they felt were corrupt. In even earlier American literature, we hear Cabeza de Vaca expressing his experience with the Indians, able in his time with them to drop many of his received ideas and “see” them anew. This drive to “see for oneself”—to know for oneself—is perhaps the essence that I want to draw forth from the idea of self-reliance, and that is largely how I intend to use the term.

Self-reliance, of course, isn’t only about the inner knowing which might contradict received ideas, it is also about action based on that knowing, and within a limited sphere, I also use self-reliance in my readings to look at female characters’ interactions with their physical universe, their control over their bodies, the spaces they occupy, and their relationships with others, but underneath, the idea of inner-knowing is paramount.

To begin with the term self-reliance, of course, assumes a self to be reliant upon. Therefore, when exploring the issue of self-reliance, I began to see it as related to the constitution of a self. In the spirit of the transparent eyeball, a transcendent form of knowing, I desire to posit a pure and transcendent self as existing before manifestation. However, the moment we move into form, or manifestation, we enter the realm of the material, in which so many influences are at play that the term “self” is highly contested. Since thought is also considered in Eastern philosophy a material state, the moment the thought of a self appears, it is at the mercy of multiple contingencies. Since I am
working with literature, written forms, both fiction and non-fiction, I must address the fact that even in nonfiction (as has been so well-discussed in theories of biography and autobiography), there is no such thing as a pure self. The sites in which literature is produced, including the mind of the creator, the demands of publication, the historical environment, the experiences of writers, publishers, and readers, are always contingent upon multiple factors. Recent theories have looked at how issues of class, race, gender, region, religion, historical time periods, colonialism, political structures, work, family, and many others make the constitution of a self a complex patchwork. I want to acknowledge this fact here in my introduction, and it will reappear in various forms throughout the following chapters. However, in order to make any statements at all, I have chosen to use the term “self” without always qualifying it. My hope is that you as reader will carry these qualifications with you as you read.

I would like to go one step further in the issue of constructing a self resistant to all the factors which contaminate/influence that very construction. Feminist criticism has in the past engaged the “dyadic model of domination and resistance” in regard to construction of feminine selves coming out of the separate spheres of domesticity and worldly engagement. Such binarism fails to express the complexity of human existence. More recent feminist explorations have looked at how multiple terms (and multiple positions of power) interplay.

"People operating with similar assumptions, values, and vocabularies can be motivated by different commitments and come to different conclusions, although that 'difference' does not express the triumph of individualism, innovation, or genius so much as the complexity
of authors' social positionality and the volatility of the rhetorical, historical, and material circumstances compelling the authorial enterprise.” (Romero 6)

In Romero's project of engaging the complexities of political and positional power, as in my project of engaging the complexities of self-reliance and desire, there is no assumption of a space that is without power relations. So discussing self-reliance, which seems to assume the "triumph of individualism," I must explain my use of the term beyond that transcendent inner knowing I posited before. The transcendence of inner knowing is an ideal. When individuals engage in the world of form, materiality, thought and relationship, ideality disappears. Complex webs of power relations enter the picture. An individual may think she acts from pure self-awareness, but that position blinds her from all the inherent power relations of social interactions. A person's position(s) affects her self-awareness and therefore affects her choices/acts, thereby preventing any choice that is entirely free of power relations. It is also true, however, that knowing an individual's position(s) does not fully define her or her relations within these power dynamics. Foucault's expression of the play of micropowers, which displaces or complicates the binarism of domination and resistance, is of use here. In his "historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying," he felt we must "turn away from all projects that claim to be global or radical" (Foucault Reader 46) and acknowledge that the moment we are born and have life, that life is engaged in the political (264). Yet he doesn't see that the point of view that we are "always limited and determined" need be a stopping place but that "we are always in the position of
beginning again" (47). It is both his understanding in discussing the roles of limitation and determinism and also his willingness to pursue new constitutions of the self beyond limits that fascinate me.

The other major term which entered this project from its conception is desire. In fact, to see that a self must exist in order to desire, one must also be able to shift and see that desire must exist in order to constitute a self, however contingent. So a study of how desire impacts the construction of a self is a study of such close weaving, it is hard to separate and define the warp from the woof. Yet, in order to make statements, in order to voice my ideas, I act as if desire is a force acting upon a self or being engaged by the self. This simplification allows me to write in a more direct way. Desire, for the purposes of this paper, includes many things. Desire is generally tied to relationships between the self and others, whether the others are characters or things. Desire can engage food (orality and nurturance), sights, sounds, actions, all the elements of our outer senses. It can engage the senses in physical relationships with others, mothers, sisters, fathers, brothers, lovers, self. It can engage in feeling relationships among all those in that list as well, including a feeling relationship with one's own self. It can engage relationships with a self's definition of God, with land, with elements in nature, with drink, and the list continues. Throughout the five novels, along with other texts, we see virtually the entire list above engaged at some level. And of course, it must be stated that the constitution of and definition of desire is just as enmeshed in the play of power relations as is the constitution of subjectivity. Naturally, it is difficult to speak of desire without employing psychoanalytic theory, as it has captured to some extent that realm of relationship. During this project and before, I have studied aspects of Freudian analysis, French
psychoanalysis, and the object-relations school. I have made most use of them in Chapter One in analyzing Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons*. I have chosen to use theory when it helps open the reading of the texts. When it appears to limit the reading, or add nothing to it, I prefer to let go of theory. I am, foremost, a literary critic rather than a literary theorists.

It has become de rigueur to position oneself as a critic, to present the categories of power relationships which affect one's speaking position. I, then, list the categories others may use to get insights into my position, my biases: I am white, female, middle-class, obviously engaged in the higher realms of education, born and raised in Texas, heterosexual, married, no children. These very categories, however, are as slippery in defining me as they are applied to any literary persona. I am, as most "whites" are, a hodge-podge of genetics, ranging from German, Irish, Swedish, and French to Native American. I am female, engaged primarily with feminist criticisms, but I am as interested in relationships with men as with women and with women as with men. I am middle-class but that doesn't illustrate my uneasy 1-1/2 generation removal from blue-collar lower class, the fact that my identity slips back and forth, and that I resent many assumptions about middle-class values being placed upon me at the same time that I realize I am a carrier of many of those same values. I have attended community colleges, business schools, a large inner-city university, and a private university. I teach at a community college in a region (Northern New Mexico) that defines itself as the intersection of three racial cultures: Native American, Hispanic, and Anglo, but I also teach foreign students from a mix of Asian and Latin countries. I work in a community with the highest per capita ratio of doctoral degrees, a city still wrestling with its "secret"
identity as the creative space for bomb-making during World War II, yet I live in the "valley" of Pojoaque, surrounded by Indian land owned by the Pueblos of Nambe and Pojoaque. My long marriage and heterosexuality may preclude some understanding of other sexualities, yet because of relationships with others who define their sexualities differently, I am not entirely ignorant or unappreciative of those "differences." My childlessness has been one of my most defining "differences," primarily because of how others relate to that knowledge regarding me. I feel that stating my "positions" says very little that is definitive about me, just as my own examinations of these same categories under the rubrics of self and desire say nothing entirely definitive about either the authors nor the characters I am discussing.

Having begun with what appeared to be a simple fascination with the interrelatedness of self (-reliance) and desire, I found that my method of approaching each individual author I chose to analyze was to "see" that author's strategy for allowing the "play" of these two elements. I make no claims that the strategies I analyze are necessarily conscious ones on the part of the authors. However, I do find the idea of strategy to be very valuable in determining and recognizing patterns in writings about feminine consciousness and feminine desire. My genuine hope is that by applying close readings to tease out these strategies, this paper will open up our readings of the texts included. My contribution, as I see it in the realm of feminist criticism, employing other aspects of critical theory, is to capture strategies for engaging feminine desire.

Chapter One begins my project with a novel published in the 1860's, in the midst of the 19th-century's most crucial shift, the Civil War, a time which threw into question virtually all elements of identity as tied to political, regional, individual, and moral
structures. Although it is set in a slightly earlier time and never directly addresses those concerns, perhaps they appear in the complexities we see in the novel itself. Chapter One examines how Elizabeth Stoddard uses the mother-daughter relationship in establishing some of the difficulties the two Morgeson sisters experience in creating separate “selves” and in negotiating desire. Also her use of witch markers and other occultisms work as strategies that allow the representation of feminine desire at the same time that they foreground the traditional discomfort with that. The marking as evil feminine independence and feminine desire by a society still tied to its Puritan past and still involved with a sense of hierarchy threatened by female independence is countered by the first-person narration of the character most marked as evil. These three strategies: mother-daughter complexities, witch markers, and the use of a first-person narrator allow Stoddard to open up how feminine self-reliance and feminine desire might be constituted and how they might be read.

In Chapter Two we move into the twentieth century with Edith Wharton’s 1917 novel, at the time of another war. We remain in New England, however, but the changes in both class and historical period give this novel a very different feel. It also narrows our focus for there is only one primary female character, conveniently made orphan to elide the mother/daughter relationship. Chapter Two uses an intertextual approach weaving together aspects of Emerson’s essay “Friendship,” Edith Wharton’s letters to her lover Morton Fullerton, and Wharton’s novel, Summer. My premise is that essentially spiritual definitions of friendship, such as Emerson’s and Wharton’s, create a space for both Edith and Charity (protagonist of the novel) to experience their sexual awakenings as deeply as they can despite serious obstacles of social convention and morality. The
issue of letter writing and the role of inscription in creating both friendship and desire and the experience of both occurs in all three texts. Friendship as a strategy for engaging desire that transgresses the boundaries of proper society is limited, but it allows a certain space for experience at the same time that it throws into flux the definition(s) of friendship across spiritual and practical lines. In the end, even the definitions of friendship shift and change, becoming essentially representations of the self rather than of the object of desire. Combining friendship with letter-writing allows them to not only shape the relationship but also negotiate the power structures within the relationships. Emerson uses the letter to distance the body while “merging” the soul, the mind. Wharton uses the letter’s distance to engage the body’s needs with those of the soul or mind. I argue that in defining and redefining the category of friendship through personal and public writing, Wharton plays with the restrictions placed upon female sexuality in a particular society at a particular time.

Chapter Three takes us back to the earliest novel in this project, 1827’s Hope Leslie. Its setting in the early 17th century further displaces our sense of chronology. I chose not to address the novels in historical progression because I did not want to see the use of strategies in some kind of developmental model. Yet, seemingly in contradiction, I do believe that historical factors are at play within the different strategies, and I hope that despite or because of my deliberate move between different historical time frames, those differences will be foregrounded. Therefore, I concentrate on Catherine Maria Sedgwick’s Hope Leslie in Chapter Three, examining how she explodes (metaphorically and literally) “patterns” of feminine consciousness engaged with desires both carnal and spiritual. I argue that she uses the Puritan strategy of “typology” to create types or
patterns for womanhood. The multiplying of patterns, whose worth in the end is based upon each one’s private heart (or inner knowing) rather than on each one’s public behavior, opens up the possibilities for the construction of feminine selves and the engagement with desire. Not only does Sedgwick create space around the definition of what it means to be a woman, particularly a “moral woman,” but she also—at the same time—opens up what it means to be an exemplar of faith. Sedgwick uses devices more familiar to her audience of the 1800s than to 20th-century readers: typology and direct address. To negotiate between what are already existing categories and definitions and add to the roster of possibilities, even if the additions are also restrictive in some ways while expansive in other, and even if the additions are shaped by cultural and societal pressures, there is still a sense of “choice.” Sedgwick gave us that sense of choice, defining and creating multiple patterns of female subjects in a novel about the roles of self-reliance and faith.

Chapter Four, although it deals with a 20th-century novel, 1925’s Barren Ground, is connected to the 19th-century by the impact of the Civil War still reverberating in the story, which begins in the 1890s. This is the first novel which shifts us regionally out of New England into the South, into Virginia tobacco country. As historical periods influence what gets written and how it gets written, so do regional influences, particularly when time and region conjunct with the pain of defeat. In this project it became apparent that Glasgow’s sense of pain was also personal, so I have made use of her own critical and autobiographical writings to help us “read” the relationship of pain and desire.

In this investigation into the writing or imagining of feminine desire and its interrelationship with self-reliance, the most stunning thing about Barren Ground is its
insistence on the insanity of feminine sexual desire, in this case particularly heterosexual desire. By casting feminine desire as madness, it makes Dorinda all that much more a victor when she overcomes desire. It isn’t just that desire is insane; it’s also that it brings pain simultaneously with the pleasure. Only a generation before the South had been caught up in the desire to secede from the North, to enact a sense of independence from the powers of the united government. That desire came to seem insane in the South’s defeat and the pain of Reconstruction. In light of the pain in the world around her as well as her own painful personal and familial experiences, Glasgow (re)writes female desire by eliminating close human relationships, thereby freeing feminine self-reliance from the obstacle of love and from the subservience to the object of desire, (perceived) masculine power. For this strategy to work, Glasgow seemed to feel that she also had to re-write masculinity. Her strategy becomes one that destabilizes traditional definitions of male and female, that mixes elements of the masculine and the feminine in each gender, even to the point of privileging the traditional qualities in the opposite gender, the masculine in the female, the feminine in the male. Reversing the qualities often placed upon woman as representative of desirable femininity and making them instead representative of desirable masculinity is part of her strategy to render women self-reliant. At one level it raises the specter of the masculine woman—having to don masculine traits in order to achieve independence. At a more interesting level, our reactions to Dorinda’s attitudes toward the men in her life (patronizing) put in play an instability in regard to received ideas of both masculinity and femininity. By placing upon her male characters the burdens of definition and limitation so often placed upon women, Glasgow makes the reader uncomfortable, makes what once seemed “natural”
when applied to women strangely “unnatural” when given to men—and vice versa. It is, if read in that light, an incredible indictment of either/or dynamics. Such displacement disrupts our reading expectations, creating contradictions which we may choose to ignore, write off as a failure of characterization, or engage as a critique of those same expectations. Glasgow also indicts experience as a teacher. It is ignoring “experience” of how things are or have been that allows Dorinda to overcome the barrenness of the inherited ground, infusing it with new life. It is also by ignoring the experience of received ideas of masculinity and femininity that allows her to alter her own enactment of femininity.

In Chapter Five, we move deeper into the South to Florida and add the element of black racial difference (racial difference appears earlier in Sedgwick’s novel in regard to Native American and other European races) and an entirely different relationship to the historical perspective of the Civil War and all that came before it in terms of slavery. The setting of Zora Neale Hurston’s 1937 novel moves from episodes that engage the white Other to a primary center of a black township in which the white Other is removed from the focus even if it never completely disappears. My purpose in this chapter is to open up readings of Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God. I attempt to contextualize the voices of many critics and their insights within the framework or strategy I see of expansion and contraction. It is my hope that this framework will allow us to more completely celebrate the complexities that go into an individual writer’s particular piece of writing, at a specific historical moment, in a distinctive cultural/racial milieu, not to mention the complications of gender and sexuality. In Hurston’s use of the strategy of expansion and contraction she achieves moments which represent the engagement of a
black feminine self, self reliance, and desire. These moments of engagement do not always posit the independence or enactment of desire that feminists love to look for. Then again, they do. Because of the implied and necessary movement flowing between the two states of opening and closing, there is, in the end, no solid ground.

Hurston, whose contemporaries “found her aggravatingly contradictory and amazingly complex” (Jordan 105), remains a writer who even among critics today is both loved and disdained. Because of her own knowledge of how her writing and speaking was often received, Hurston, in this novel, situates the power of telling first, yet even more, the quality of the listeners are foregrounded and called into immediate question. Further, by situating Janie’s telling of the story in the teacher/student model and using language that echoes the Jesus/apostle model, Hurston’s strategy places the writer or teller of stories in the role of savior, a kind of god. She plays that power model against other folk tale devices that situate God in vulnerable, human positions, undermining omnipotence. This device plays with the idea of “creator,” displacing the standard masculine/white imagination implied in the creation of literature with a goddess-like black/ feminine imagination. However, the various signifiers throughout the text that draw upon classical Christian ideologies of God and those from African-American folk and trickster tales work to destabilize received ideas of the relationships among the power of telling, the power of listening and the complexities of making meaning. It isn’t, therefore, simply a replacing of traditional dominant imaginative discourse with its opposite—a marginalized imaginative discourse brought into the center. The mix of references and devices expand or multiply the processes of making meaning and question the writer’s/reader’s abilities to make meaning in any concrete, universal way. By
expanding the processes and foregrounding the fact that writers do not make meaning in isolation but in collaboration with an audience of readers, Hurston does two things. She fragments the much-admired “universal” writing (ocean) of dominant discourse into multiple voices of marginalized experience/representation (infinite drops of water), and at the same time, she enlarges the universal ocean of expression. As we see, the interchange of expansion and contraction have a lot to offer in Hurston’s representation of a black feminine consciousness and of desire.

The results of my own engagement of desire in working on this project are the strategies which I have “discovered” in “reading” these various texts with self, self-reliance, and desire in mind. I hope that by thinking in terms of strategy we might as readers open up representations of what it means (however contingent or unstable) to be a woman desiring.


7 The first quote comes from "What is Enlightenment." The second quote comes from "Right of Death and Power over Life."


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Creating a Self in the Midst of Desire and Denial
Mothering, Food, and Witch-Marking as Strategy in
Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard's The Morgesons

"In her lifetime, Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard was compared to Balzac, Tolstoi,
George Eliot, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the Bronte sisters, but her works were not widely
read" (Buell xi). In fact, Lawrence Buell and Sandra Zagarell proclaim her as “next to
Melville and Hawthorne, the most strikingly original voice in the mid-nineteenth-century
American novel,” with an “astringent, elliptical style” more appealing to modern readers
than to those of the 19th century. Stoddard’s style is essentially transitional, as she
combines both the elements of Hawthonian romance (even Brontëan gothic) and the
“regional realism” later to be seen in Sarah Orne Jewett among others (Buell xv). In
creating a feminist bildungsroman, Stoddard has taken her heroine through somewhat
conventional scenarios, aligning with popular norms in woman's fiction of the time, yet
also “expos[ing]” their submissive nature and “transforming” her heroine into a woman
“more self-confident, more sexually emancipated, less morally self-doubting” than most
traditional heroines of her era (Buell xviii). Curiously, The Morgesons does not appear
anywhere in Nina Baym’s classic source book for 19th-century women writers, Woman’s
Fiction. This is a striking omission, because the novel, published in 1862, is written by a
woman, addressed to women, and documents the tale of a “heroine who, beset with
hardships, finds within herself the qualities of intelligence, will, resourcefulness, and
courage sufficient to overcome them” (Baym 22). In short, it meets Baym’s three criteria.
A tale about two sisters with very different experiences, The Morgesons becomes a story
about sameness and difference. More than most fiction written by and about women,
further, it foregrounds female desire. In it, self-reliance and self-control are woven together, as are desire and denial. Complexes of desire and denial, repression and sublimation, acceptance and discipline all mix as the two sisters of The Morgesons try to become individual selves.

Cassandra, the first person narrator, and her sister, Veronica, both achieve an education and a sense of self but their paths are very different. Cassandra’s path contains the most motion, as we see her moved to places and families other than her own immediate tribe, each site providing additional experiences. Veronica’s path is one of containment, for she rarely leaves Surrey and even restricts her movements away from the family house. Cassandra’s placement at three different sites echoes the structure of Hawthorne’s three scaffold scenes. Each site is another stage in her development, religious, social, moral and personal. After a male heir is born, Cass is sent to spend a year in Barmouth, moving from the family, the Congregational church, and the first school from which she had been expelled. In Barmouth she lives with her Aunt Mercy and her Grand’ther Warren, her mother’s father. Here she is moved back into her mother’s place, in a household that still holds to the most rigid of Puritan values and beliefs. She also attends another girls’ seminary with about the same success as in Surrey. This site trains her in her religious inheritance, reinforces her social displacement, and places her in the same position as her mother, echoing her mother’s past actions and past desires. Since her two uncles had escaped the Puritan father as soon as possible, lived merry and died young, this is a place inhabited primarily by women, but women subjected to the Puritanism embodied in Grand’ther Warren, a tailor. He doesn’t
saw any new designs, simply reiterates the ones of the past. And women who enter this
environment with joy in their hearts risk having that joy converted to a deadening faith.⁴

After a sojourn at home, Cassandra then moves to Rosville to live for a time with
a newly discovered relative, Charles Morgeson. Here Cassandra is in the fold of secular
Unitarianism, to her mother's distress, and she finally has the modest success of
remaining in the Academy with Miss Prior and making her first female friend. This is a
family that is family—some distant branch of Morgesons—and yet, because they are also
virtual strangers, the dynamics are very different. If while living in Barmouth Cassandra
first discovered that her mother had desires, then she discovers her own capacity for
sexual desire while living with Charles Morgeson. In fact, it is the attraction between
Charles and Cassandra, never consummated, that marks her entry into adulthood and a
clearer sense of her self as an individual with choices and dilemmas of her own.

Her last trip away from Surrey is a visit to the Somers' family in Belem. She is
there for a month at the invitation of Ben Somers, who is now secretly engaged to Cass'
sister Veronica. Veronica, true to form, does not come, is not even expected to, but Ben
desires that Cassandra meet his family. Interestingly, the Somers are also distant kin
through marriage, but Mrs. Somers, nee Pickersgill, does not value that side of the family
and dismisses the connection. In Belem there is no real religious center although there
remain moral issues. Mrs. Somers is the conduit for the family money, for her husband
married into the wealth. The rule has been that the fortune would not be distributed until
the youngest male heir reached the age of twenty-one. This has had the effect of keeping
the brothers, who count on an inheritance rather than on the work of their own hands or
minds, playing the roles of dilettantes. Upon this visit, Cass discovers that as the
youngest was turning 21, Mrs. Somers managed to birth another son and delay the
distribution of wealth (and extend her control over the family pursestrings) yet again.
The tensions in this family are intense; this site is not one that educates through positive
experiences as much as through the negative—including the family tendency toward
alcoholism. Nonetheless, Cassandra again discovers an object of desire, the older brother
Desmond, who has gained his own scarring experiences as Cassandra has hers. Of
course, Cass is not an approved match, echoing the rejection of her own mother, Mary, by
an early love’s family and by Locke’s father when Locke chooses to wed Mary anyway.
However, there is another vision of female choice at this site. The sisters of Ben and
Desmond are more intellectual, well read, and outspoken than any other females in the
text. But the unpleasant tensions, riding just under the surface interactions, are the
catalyst for the introduction of the occult, mesmerism, automatic writing. The
implications for female desire are that it is always already written and that it has a force
of its own, as will be discussed later. After her time with the Somers, Cassandra returns
to Surrey with no intention of ever really leaving it again. She has been one who learns
not through instruction but through direct experience, and she has garnered enough
experience in her years away from Surrey to now process it and know herself. Her
experiences have attached to wherever her senses led her, and in returning and cocooning
in Surrey, the transformation into her adult self is made complete.

Veronica, seeing Cassandra bundled off to Barmouth, where she is sure to be
“stifled” (27), realizes that she does not want that to happen to her. She takes her
education, then, into her own hands. She learns through books, through observation of
others, and through her own recurring illnesses. In taking charge, in a somewhat
reductive way, of her own environment, Veronica prevents any exile from home. She
writes, keeps a diary, but is generally reserved with her family, revealing only in her
outbreaks of temper some of her real feelings. It seems logical that she rejects the senses
that so engage Cassandra's journey. Veronica is a "sensitive" who garners pain rather
than delight from indulging her senses. When ill with the measles,

[she] was the worst patient. When her room was darkened she got out of bed, tore
the quilt that was fastened to the window, and broke three panes of glass before
she could be captured and taken back ... She cried with anger, unless her hands
were continually washed with lavender water, and made little pellets of cotton
which she stuffed in her ears and nose, so that she might not hear or smell. (56)

Verry prefers the sense of sight—rejecting the darkened room which limits her vision, but
she cannot handle the senses that come in through smell and hearing. Even the bathing of
her skin is perhaps a touch to counteract the other stimulus upon her skin—the itching of
the measles itself. As Cassandra realizes later,

We did not perceive the process, but Verry was educated by sickness; her mind
fed and grew on pain, and at last mastered it. The darkness in her nature broke;
by slow degrees she gained health, though never much strength. Upon each
recovery a change was visible; a spiritual dawn had risen in her soul; moral
activity blending with her ideality made her life beautiful, even in the humblest
sense. Veronica! you were endowed with genius; but while its rays penetrated
you, we did not see them. How could we profit by what you saw and heard, when
we were blind and deaf? (59)
Veronica, allowed to remain at home in part because of her illnesses and in part because of her temper and willfulness, developed a natural genius for music, an attunement with nature from which she “prognosticated gales, meteors, high tides, and rain” (60), and an awareness of plants and planting seasons. Also, due to her own experiences with illness, she was a comfort to others who were ill and suggested “agreeable occupation . . . happy ideas” to all who were well (60). Her father felt that “home was her sphere,” and that he could provide all her needs, a mistaken belief, for he never credited her with the same sexual desire he so obviously recognized in Cassandra.

In the following sections, I will concentrate on elements of desire in Cassandra’s and Veronica’s development. The earliest desire is the complete connection to the primary caregiver, usually the mother. Getting fed, getting held, identifying with the mother as part of the self are natural aspects of this early development. The joys and difficulties that come out of early desires will be discussed in connection with the mother and then in connection with food, for these two elements—mother and food—are given a great deal of space in this novel of desire. Next I will look at the markers placed in Stoddard’s text which tie women (desiring women or women desired), especially Cassandra, to the role of witch.

Desire: Mothering, Food, and Illness—Veronica

Freud’s models concentrated early on the male child/only child dynamic; only later in his career did he begin to believe that the pre-oedipal stage might be more important for female self-construction than the oedipal. His most important gift to this reading of desire is his formulation of the historicity of the subject rather than the emphasis placed
upon developmental stages by object-relations theorists. Any complex can occur or reoccur in the history of the subject. Orality is not banished by other developments. It may overlap, or disappear only to reappear at some later date. This is of value in looking at orality issues throughout this novel.

Nancy Chodorow examined the issue of the interlinking between psychoanalysis and sociology in constructing a self. She felt that “women's mothering is a central and defining feature of the social organization of gender and is implicated in the construction and reproduction of male dominance itself” (9). It is women's role, historically with the rise of capitalism, to reproduce children, and as Chodorow and other social theorists have seen, to “reproduce themselves” (36 emphasis in original). That is, women teach what they have been taught, training sons and daughters in “what is normal and appropriate” (35). Becoming a self is in psychological and sociological terms a coming to terms with a self in relation (76). And because girls do not experience the same distinct Me/Not Me of the male oedipal period, their sense of differentiation is not so clear cut. “Because of their mothering by women, girls come to experience themselves as less separate than boys, as having more permeable ego boundaries. Girls come to define themselves more in relation to others” (93). When girls do turn toward their fathers as objects in the oedipal stage, they do not entirely let go of the mother as the primary love object. They have a more complicated sense of what it is to be in relation. They identify with the mother and recognize sameness. This gives them a sense of warmth and merging. That same merging can simultaneously be terrifying for its loss of boundaries. The identification may effect internalized object-relations as well as external relations.

Internalization and distortion of the experience of being mothered can create a feeling of
rejection (real or not) that helps establish a superego that condemns the daughter's behavior. Or, as Freud sees it, because females have a weaker superego, it is really their fear of “a loss of love” from other people, especially the mother, that makes them more compliant. However, it appears to be the internal critic which can affect early relational developments, including a distorted relation to food (the orality of mother love which is obviously not about food but satisfaction). Daughters, needing to individuate themselves from their mothers, experience ambivalence: both hostility and love. Mothers, too, experience the relationship with daughters as fraught with ambivalence. The sameness and difference, the merging and the deliberate rejection all exist from the mother’s point of view as well, so it may appear easier to raise a son than a daughter because there is no such confusion between the selves. The mother may also feel ambivalent about the reproduction of social inequality that, according to Chodorow, is part of the mother’s legacy to the daughter. Daughters develop a personal identification with their mother, and ... a tie between affective processes and role learning—between libidinal and ego development—characterizes feminine development. . . Personal identification, according to Slater and Winch, consists in diffuse identification with someone else’s general personality, behavioral traits, values, and attitudes. Positional identification [what boys experience] consists, by contrast, in identification with specific aspects of another’s role and does not necessarily lead to the internalization of the values or attitudes of the person identified with. (175)
It becomes clear that in the development of the psychic as well as the social self, daughters' relationships to the mother are crucial and reproductive.

The mother/daughter relationships in Stoddard's *The Morgesons* is worth examining in the light of psychoanalytic and sociological theory. In terms of her historical nature, it is important to make clear that this mother, Mary Warren Morgeson, although a Congregationalist in 19th-century New England, is an inheritor of an essentially Puritan ethic. The role of Puritanism in her own socialization and in the socializing of her two daughters has varying effects. In fact the results of mothering two different daughters complicates the synthesis of Chodorow's analysis, for the two develop very differently, which argues for some individuality amidst the constructedness of creating a self.

The mother, central to the story of female development and female desire, is nonetheless not framed as central in Cassandra's narrative. She does hold power, however. More often than not we see her sitting in a chair. This kind of stationary power is evocative of synecdoche, the breast, the mother, not an individual but a symbol. There is a kind of stasis also in this still portrait of her, whether the chair is in her winter bedroom, the dining room, or outside. She even dies in her chair. The times we see her in motion are few. She does travel to take Cassandra to stay with the Charles Morgesons, and other trips (few) and there is one scene in which she is entertaining local women for a meal. She is tied—very strongly—to her domestic sphere, almost never leaving it in reality as she cannot leave it psychically except through her religious wonderings/wanderings.

Her stasis and domesticity are contrasted by tidbits of her past which indicate dramatic movement and non-domesticity. When either daughter's behavior is untamed or wild,
servants or townspeople wonder, is the daughter “like her mother?” (13), hinting of a past no longer in evidence and reminding us of the sameness of mothers and daughters. But the two daughters who are the major focus of this novel feel very differently about their mother as evidenced by their reaction to her death. Cassandra remembers “her goodness and beauty, her pure heart, her simplicity ... I pitied her dead because she would never know how I valued her” (206). But Veronica, whose sighs sounded with "Duty," according to Cass, says, “Perhaps mother was always right about me too; she was against me” (211).

Early in the novel, we get a sense of the vexed relationship of desire between Verry and her mother. As Cassandra reveals, “There was a conflict in mother’s mind respecting Veronica. She did not love her as she loved me; but strove the harder to fulfill her duty” (13). Veronica, as the secondary sister, the one whose voice must come to us through her sister’s narrative choices, is allowed the most obvious “eccentricity.” Eccentricity is used in this text as synonymous with choice beyond societal or religious conformity. It is also used for personal disciplines set in place (or attempted) to help an individual overcome some real or perceived weakness of character: Ben Somers and his alcoholism; Charles Morgeson and his virtually incestuous and certainly adulterous love for Cassandra; Desmond Somers and his alcoholism as well; and Veronica’s disciplines to both “create” an authentic self and to overcome her temper.

We first meet Verry with hair “streaming with milk” after having pulled a panful over herself from a pantry shelf (12). The image of milk and what it has to do with mothering in the 19th century (mother’s breast and oral satisfaction) is appropriately tied to Verry, who feels deprived of her real mother’s “milk” and must try to find it elsewhere.
Veronica is a young girl who sees in food some representation of the nurturant versus disciplinary mother. Veronica’s own superego has internalized the rejection by her mother and acts out the ambivalence her mother feels. So, while Verry bathes in the milk, she does not drink it, or take it in. Throughout the novel, Verry is utterly fascinated by food, even designing dishes to be made by the cook; however, she generally denies herself the pleasure of actually eating. She may sit at the family feast with crackers on her plate, noticing how energetically her sister Cassandra partakes. This narcissistic obsession with her body and having some control over it appear linked to the ambivalent desire for her mother’s loving attention and for her mother’s acknowledgment that her loving attention is not entirely real. An example will suffice:

‘Mother,’ she said, ‘eating toast does not make me better-tempered; I feel evil still. You know,’ turning to [Cass], ‘that my temper is worse than ever; it is like a tiger’s.’

‘Oh, Verry,’ said mother, ‘not quite so bad; you are too hard upon yourself.’

‘Mother, you said so to Hepsey, when I tore her turban from her head, it was so ugly. Can you forget you said such a thing?’

‘Verry, you drive me wild. Must I say that I was wrong? Say so to my own child?’

Verry turned her face to the wall and said no more. (52)

Veronica’s obsessions with food, her temper, her body, and her mother’s attention are linked to the illnesses she endures as well. Veronica suffers from recurring illnesses that have been speculated on as consumptive (for Stoddard had a sibling who was consumptive) or hysterical. Joan Brumberg, in a footnote to her book
Fasting Girls, indicates that Veronica’s symptoms and behaviors fit a combination of dyspepsia and anorexia. In her youth, these illnesses occur seemingly in response to thwarted desires yet also as a technique for gaining pleasure. As Cassandra’s narrative tells us, “When Verry suffered long and mysterious illnesses, which made her helpless for weeks, [mother] watched her day and night, but rarely caressed her. At other times Verry was left pretty much to herself and her ways” (13). Illness at least gets her mother’s attention.

As the second child Veronica senses her place as in competition with Cassandra. This is a competition she cannot win, so she sets herself the task of differentiation. She is not like Cass. Indeed, in personality and temperament as well as physical form the two do not share much. They are a study in contrasts. Veronica “was never hungry” while Cassandra has quite an appetite. The sense that Verry is not hungry is Cassandra’s, and while I agree that Verry seems to eat little, she is extremely interested in food, choosing however to deny herself that pleasure. Veronica is thin and “elfish,” small with long straight hair like her mother’s. Cassandra is described as robust and voluptuous with wild wheat colored hair that is thick and difficult to contain. Although Cassandra is called “possessed” and references make her bewitching, Cass tells us that Verry is so odd in her behavior, so full of tricks, that I did not love her. She was a silent child, and liked to be alone. But whoever had the charge of her must be watchful. She tasted everything, and burnt everything, within her reach. A blazing fire was too strong a temptation to be resisted. The disappearance of all loose articles was ascribed to her; but nothing was
said about it, for punishment made her more impish and daring in her 
pursuits. (13) 
People asked, “Do you think she is like her mother?” And although Cassandra largely 
portrays her mother as still, remote, dreamy, and very involved in her spiritual life, Mary 
Morgeson is the source for Veronica’s wildness. Even in the attempt to differentiate to 
create a separate and authentic self, sameness gets played out. 

When Verry is about eleven, a son is born, providing Locke Morgeson with a male 
heir. Veronica already felt a strong rivalry with Cassandra for her mother’s affection; 
now she reacts to her “disinheritance” (both literal and emotional) with illness and 
anorexic-like behavior. Verry’s hope of gaining some of her mother’s attention any other 
way is shattered. She announces the boy’s arrival to Cassandra, who appears to have had 
no idea that her mother was pregnant. The birth is a shock to both daughters. Verry 
informs Cass:

‘You have a brother. Temperance [cook] says my nose is broken. He will 
be like you, I suppose, and have everything he asks for. I don’t care for 
him; but,’ crying out with passion, ‘get up. Mother wants to see you, I 
know.’ (25, emphasis in original) 

Verry does not claim the boy as her brother; in her phrasing she clearly places herself 
outside the realm of the family. The boy will be like Cass as Veronica is not. Mother 
wants to see Cass, not Verry. It makes a great deal of sense that her response to this birth 
is illness. Before her mother has recovered from the birth, 

Veronica was taken ill, and was not convalescent till spring. Delicacy of 
constitution the doctor called her disorder. She had no strength, no
appetite, looked more elfish than ever. She would not stay in bed, and
could not sit up so father had a chair made for her . . . One of her
amusements was to cut off her hair, lock by lock, and cut it short before
she was well enough to walk about. (26)

Veronica’s illness gains attention from her father, her Aunt Mercy who is helping
out, and Temperance the cook. Veronica makes music, creates “grotesque costumes,”
and gives Temperance suggestions for “elaborate dishes, which she rarely ate”
(internalizing a deprivation she senses in her relationship to her mother). Illness also
gives her the power to keep certain people at bay. She sends Cassandra away because
Cass’ robust health is an affront. She is very angry with her father, Locke Morgeson,
who now has a son to inherit and displace the sisters. Servants speaking after the birth
give us a sense of things: “I vow, . . . girls are thought nothing of in this ‘ligious section;
they may go to the poor house, as long as the sons have plenty” (25). Cassandra even
includes her mother’s response to Arthur’s birth, “I am glad it is not a woman” (26).
Perhaps Veronica’s cutting of her hair, “lock by lock,” a word choice which echoes her
father’s name Locke, is some symbolic gesture of rejection directed at her father, or at the
mother who dutifully serves her in her illnesses, but “rarely caresse[s] her(13). There is a
double edge to cutting her hair, which makes her more boylike and reduces her femininity
by rejecting one of the biggest symbols of femininity in this time period (an attempt to
become a son?). Her actions, including not eating, although powerful in getting certain
 attentions and in expressing some kind of family dysfunction, all serve to physically
reduce the space her body occupies.
In addition to her behaviors, she also expresses intense rejection of certain senses. For instance, she cannot bear the sound or the smell of the sea, a difficulty as their house is built beside the sea. This may relate to the fact that her father is a shipbuilder, that all their wealth comes from the sea in cargoes, and that she will inherit none of that wealth. There is also the metaphorical role that the sea plays. It is an enveloping unity, a wholeness that would swallow her individuality if she let it—like the (symbolic) mother. In her strong need to be different than anyone else in the family, a family she feels has largely rejected her, the sea is yet another threat to that construction of self. The one sound she delights in is music of her own making. She has developed into a musical genius, playing compositions of her own design, sublimating her desire into the music itself, "her fingers interpreting her feelings, touching the keys of the piano as if they were the chords of her thought" (56). Her father-in-law finds this genius "... a deplorable thing for a woman!" (242) But creating music of her own is to "write" some part of her self that is not contained in the cultural scripts she tries to avoid, and because it is not a force that is other to herself—as is the sea—there is no threat.

As we will see in the section on witch accusations and desire, Verry is marked as devilish early in the novel. However, as the earlier quote shows, Verry grew spiritually through her misery during illnesses. The novel, therefore, also portrays her as fitting another 19th century convention of the "angel in the house." In denying herself almost all nourishment and by suffering illnesses, Veronica has created a thin, delicate body, often the symbol in 19th century art of the noblest of women—those who also deny themselves or are completely pure of sexual desire. Veronica, the young imp who denied herself food in order to improve her temper is now figured as saintlike. "She
grows/ More infantile, auroral, mild, / And still the more she lives and knows/ The 
lovelier she’s expressed as child.”16 Veronica is never seen as sexually desirable for her 
body or her sensuality. Even when Ben Somers professes his adoration he is worried 
that “‘she is so pure, so delicate, that when I approach her, in spite of my besottedness, 
my love grows lambent’” (160). His love grows more brilliant, more clear, translucent, 
therefore more pure. This is not the earthly passion which Cassandra evokes, even in 
Ben. Yet with consistency and humor, Elizabeth Stoddard allows Veronica her first 
natural meal once she becomes engaged to Ben, “‘eating like an ordinary mortal’” (159). 
She even asks Ben to go with her to see a ship coming in, a willingness to move into the 
community and out of the house. Her desire for Ben has altered slightly her severe self-
restrictions.

Upon her mother’s death, Verry goes into seclusion, asking Cass to keep people 
from her. Something interesting happens between the sisters in the midst of their grief. 
Verry, who has always kept Cass at some distance, says, “‘I think we might kiss each 
other now’” (211 emphasis in original). Further, Verry even vows, “‘I will never lose 
my temper with you again’” (211). With no mother to compete for, the sisters can be 
close in a way they never were before.

Desire: Mothering, Food and Female Sexuality—Cassandra

The mother’s death alters the family structure, each member falling away from her 
strong centering. The father is gone a great deal and in fact remarries in secret. Since 
he marries Alice, widow to Charles Morgeson, Cassandra is furious. She confesses her 
unconsummated love for Charles and his for her and says that she cannot live in the 
same house as Alice. Locke Morgeson is disgusted by the blatancy of his daughter’s
past desire, but he gives her just enough money so she and Verry can remain in the
family house by the sea with one or two servants. Aunt Mercy and young Arthur go to
live with Locke, Alice and her three children.

Cassandra (Cass) Morgeson is the first person narrator of this novel, so it is
through her eyes that we get our sense of the family Morgeson living in the small village
Surrey (not unlike Mattapoisett, Massachusetts, where Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard was
born). With the addition of reported dialogue from other players in the text, we get
glimpses of how others see Cassandra and life situations in general. Through Stoddard’s
use of a first person narrator we get to experience “an exploration into the nature of
female sexuality and the process of self-creation that has not hitherto been undertaken by
any female American writer” (Harris 152).11 The first line in the novel, then, has Cass’
Aunt Mercy calling her a child “‘possessed’” (5). While Cassandra is intent on reaching
a book on polar expeditions, her aunt is caught up noticing that Cass’ shoes have fallen
off, that her stockings are awry, that as a ten year old, her clambering over a chest of
drawers is not ladylike. Her mother’s response is to take her to task in her choice of
“‘unprofitable stories’”—unprofitable because they do not deal with the soul and do not
make sure “‘your heart is right before God’” (6). The verbal link to the demonic
“possessed,” in conjunction with the reference to the biblical “For what shall it profit a
man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36, emphasis
mine) is threaded throughout the book. Here, while ironically seeming to compare a book
on world exploration to the more saintly tome (the Boston Recorder) the mother is
reading, it is also delineating the battle drawn for Cassandra between the remnants of
Puritan repression of women and women’s souls and her own expanding drives and
desires. Cassandra is drawn towards exploring the world through her senses which attach to objects, activating a cycle of desire. Although Cassandra and her mother, Mary, do not have the antagonistic relationship that Veronica and Mary have, there is frustration and ambivalence on the part of both. Perhaps Mary sees in Cassandra some of the freedom of spirit she once had when she “rode the white colt bare-back round the big meadow, with her hair flying”" (49). But Mary has since become dedicated to her spiritual growth, to the revivalism that characterizes her time, and she sees her Puritan father as “so good a man” that he might improve her daughter’s chances for salvation (51).

In a time jump from the opening scene that makes Cassandra about 13 years old, there is another scene that places “spiritual aspiration” and earthy “sensations” in conjunction. Cassandra has been kicked out of school by the schoolmistress, Desire Cushman. Belying her name, the schoolmistress seems to be more an indoctrinator of surface religious virtues than someone who has dealt with elements of personal desire. Cass’s mother wants her to learn some useful skills at housekeeping, yet she delegates the chore of training her daughter to the hired help who simply send Cass out of the way. Mrs. Morgeson does, however, require that Cass do “a square of patchwork each day and to hear her read a Psalm” (14). Cass doesn’t actually listen; she simply guesses when responses are required. But the older, reminiscing Cassandra records that

wherever I was, or whatever I did, no feeling of beauty ever stole into my mind. I never turned my face up to the sky to watch the passing of a cloud, or mused before the undulating space of the sea, or looked down upon the earth with the curiosity of thought, of spiritual aspiration. I was moved and governed by my sensations, which continually changed, and passed away—to come again . . . (14)
Throughout the novel, Cassandra is one who must learn through her experiences, drawn into them more by her senses than by any thought of acquiring knowledge. One definition of desire is to be at the control of one’s senses. The senses reach out to one object after another, desiring to “have” each one, and having had it, move on to another. Desire, if there is no control over the senses, will lead her on and on.

Being free of school, Cassandra has no one or no situation to control her or educate her. Mary, although she wishes Cassandra to learn certain lessons, finds it difficult to create the situations for learning here at home. Cass does learn about female desire in regard to food, however. Entering the house with a nest of mice, she discovers that a tea/luncheon is about to begin. The richness of the feast is almost obsessive: quartered quince, “surup,” cheese (“We must have cheese”), green tea, doughnuts with grated loaf sugar, waffles, shortcake, and apple fritters (16-19). As the preparations are going on, Verry moves around sucking on a lemon while Cassandra sneaks lumps of sugar. When the feast is ready and the women are invited in, “[t]hey came at last with an air of indifference, as if the idea of eating had not yet occurred. . . [then] fell upon the waffles” (18-19). In this moment, Cass learns that in certain social contexts women’s desire must be hidden using certain social manners. At the same time, she gets to notice how women assert their power. “It is well known that when women meet together they do not discuss their rights, but take them, in revealing the little weaknesses and peculiarities of their husbands” (19) There is affectation and manipulation in both these instances. Women must hide their hunger, and yet take on an “air of easy superiority” despite the usual meek behavior with the husbands. There is power in these artful plays, but it is not a power that actually accomplishes anything.
It is also at this luncheon that Cassandra and Verry have a quarrel. Verry has a beautiful butterfly pinned to her dress, but Cass has a nest of mice. Later Cass discovers that Verry has removed the mice (placing them in one of the women’s workbags) but won’t admit it. Cassandra, in her anger, finds the butterfly (now in Verry’s Bible) and crushes it. Christopher Felker in his book *Reinventing Cotton Mather in the American Renaissance*, uses this as a sample of Cassandra’s evil and witchlike nature. Certainly it is not a positive action, but it seems more like sibling fighting of the most normal kind. Within families, siblings do play power games among themselves and express anger through destruction. Cassandra had the pleasure attached to the mice taken from her, so she took the pleasure Veronica had attached to the butterfly and destroyed it. The circle from pleasure to pain, very familiar to Freud, comes out here. It echoes, oddly, the convolutions of the women’s partaking of pleasure at the party.

As mentioned before, after the son Arthur is born, Cassandra, disinherited in a sense as is Verry, is sent to live with her maternal grandfather in Barmouth [Bar-mouth] (an interesting name when considered under the theme of appetite and the orality of early desire). It is her Aunt Mercy who suggests she move there to attend a new female seminary, and it is her mother who specifically objects: “What! ... Shall I subject—” (27); and it is her father who takes her to Barmouth and visits her there. According to Zagarell, this is “her mother’s legacy,” this instruction in “female subjection” at the hands of a rigid and humorless puritan (48). Cass sees that her mother does it “because she wished me to comprehend the influences of her early life, and learn some of the lessons she had been taught” (27). It must also be noted that this subjection comes through the hand of a man, the grandfather, so that a direct link of the legacy of female lines vs. male
lines becomes slippery. Subjection is, of course, a form of denial or control placed upon
a person from outside; but it is not exactly in opposition to the self-control we see in
Veronica. Subjection and self-control in *The Morgesons* feed each other and are parts of
one another, and as we will see, they also feed desire.

Veronica says that Cass will be “stifled” by their grandfather, but at least “the
plums in his garden [are] good,” seeing food as a compensation (27). In Barmouth,
Cassandra discovers that she is “like her mother” in temperament. When she pinches the
cat, she is accused of “playing over [her] mother’s capers”’ (30). Feeling constrained, she
says, “I rushed into the garden and trampled the chamomile bed. I had heard that it grew
faster for being subjected to that process” (31). Cassandra must wonder what process she
is being subjected to; she certainly feels crushed. Similes and metaphors abound,
identifying her with a cat whose tail could be “cut off” in order to “manage” it better (31),
and a bird whose father wants to “clip [its] wings” (38). At school she is tortured by the
local girls with oblique references to her mother’s behavior, “‘when she was in love, poor
thing’” (40). She resides in the place of her mother, in the communal memories of her
mother’s desire, experiencing all these threats of bodily or psychic destruction, the world
wanting to strip her of her individual power.13 Deeply unhappy, Cassandra desires
nothing so much as escape, but she denies herself even rides with her father: “the motion
of the carriage, and the conveying power of the horse, created such a fearful and realizing
sense of escape that I gave up riding with him” (42). In a place where she discovers that
her mother was once as wild as she, in fact, a bareback horse rider, where she “stands” for
her mother, this masculine offer to escape is both threatening and tempting; it is a figure
of sexual intercourse inappropriately offered by the father (he whisked her mother away,
didn’t he?) and as such is a false solution to her dilemma, which is to deal with both her mother’s sexuality and her own.

Veronica's method of coping with the mother’s sexuality (and the resulting son) is to develop the habit of isolation; and her withdrawal distances her from her family and restricts even the rooms she will enter, for she avoids any view of the sea, the same sea that resonates with Cassandra’s own sexual awakening. Veronica stays in her room, and for a time at least, Cassandra is sewn up within the fabric of her tailor Grand’ther’s home, her wandering spirit “confined” to the garden (42).

While Cassandra learns about female sexual desire as embodied in her mother and in her own body, she finds that her grandfather pays her no attention, “except when [she eats] less than usual” (43). Clearly denial is a method for gaining male attention. It is also at his table that Cassy gets a lesson about sacred food and the body of Christ. Her aunt bakes the ritual bread for Holy Communion, and the leftovers are boiled “with milk for a pudding” and “the sacred ideality of the ceremony I had seen ... was destroyed” (45). Cassandra’s desires, although later linked to transcendental moments, are not spiritual desires, or at least not as a spirit/body split. The body, its corporeality emphasized by the consumption or denial of food and/or drink and by its confinement in space, is the nexus for all the desire in this text.

In the constraint of living in Barmouth, Cassandra discovers that desire is not eliminated but increased. Subjected as she is, she blossoms as a subject, assuming “a womanly shape” (46). Indeed, she has quite an appetite: “‘The creature will eat us out of house and home,’ said Grand’ther” (47). Again joined by proximity, another moral lesson follows: When Pious Pardon Hitch, a “model in Barmouth,” becomes worried
about his soul (47), Cassandra sees that his good behavior has guaranteed him no peace of mind, so she "might as well be a thorough reprobate then" (47). Control or restriction of the self may serve to increase appetite, maybe even increase pleasure, but denial does not guarantee spiritual peace. This calls into question the trope of spirituality embodied in female fasting, which was popular in the 19th century.

Cassandra, having been subjected to her mother’s puritan heritage, must now synthesize the confusing contrast between the history of her mother as a passionate breaker of rules under Puritan tyranny, and the "dreamy" semi-religious woman who now rarely steps outside her house beside the sea. She must also deal with the threat of this history to her own future as an independent being (the fear of becoming like the mother). Returning home to Surrey, she finds her mother "in her old place" (50), as if she has not moved in the intervening time. The mother's stasis is also centered around the son, whom she finds easier to love than her daughters. This is a distressing portrayal of the idea of feminine inheritance, as much for the mother, who perhaps dreads that her daughters must follow in her own path and finds it easier to "mother" a son, as for the daughter, who must try to "open up" or negotiate a new path beside the one offered by her mother's story.

Returned home and grown, Cassandra's path concealed nothing: "... the desires and emotions which are usually kept as a private fund I displayed and exhausted. My audacity shocked those who possessed this fund. My candor was called anything but truthfulness" (59). Her own family calls her "possessed" and "lawless" (60). And it is this lawless girl who goes to live with the cousin Charles Morgeson in Rosville.
Rosville, however it may be pronounced, echoes with the greenhouse full of roses and exotic flowers which Charles grows. Is Cassandra here to be pruned and fertilized?

It is after her first meal there that she tells her mother, "I am afraid I am an animal. Did you notice how little the Morgesons ate?" (71) The table, so unlike the one at home, is well-arranged, glittering with "glass and French china" (68).

... the lamb chops were fragile; the bread was delicious, but cut in transparent slices, and the butter pat was nearly stamped through with its bouquet of flowers. This was all the feast except sponge cake, which felt like muslin in the fingers. Still hungry, I observed that Cousin Charles and Alice had finished. I felt constrained to end my repast. (69)

It seems to be her hunger and her inability or unwillingness to hide it which marks her as lawless. And in Rosville, Cassandra comes to desire something more dangerous than food. Rosville is a "secular" town, and although at first, Cassandra misses "the vibration of the moral sword" of Barmouth (74), such throbbing desire is soon replaced by the bond between her and Charles: "developing according to its own mysterious law" (74).

In an entirely new desire to please, Cassandra conforms to "the ways of the family ... even in the matter of small breakfasts and light suppers" (77). She also learns to keep her self, her clothing, her hair, and her room neat, discovering beauty in order. These disciplines are not forced upon her, except as the desire to please exerts force. She observes that these behaviors are chosen by those around her, and in trying them out for herself she discovers a personal discipline she never had before. This new strength of self under control is tested severely by her other newly discovered desire.
Charles Morgeson is a man who loves to master wild horses with whips; he is also a man who loves to raise flowers so fragile that “I have to protect them from my own touch” (81). His Byronic looks, his violence, his passion all arouse Cassandra. But her response, desire, is shaped by cultural forces just as the rules of eating have been. In an earlier scene in the novel, at the age of 13, Cassandra flirts with her father and appropriates his riding whip, snapping it at her dog, and wants a suit of clothes to match her father’s (12). The scene slips between her desire to have her father and the desire to be her father, to have control of the whip. Now she is faced with a man who is a Morgeson, of her father’s line, older and married. And her first night in his home, she reads one of his few books, poems by Byron. Set up to desire a Byronic hero, Cassandra does; and after the first scene of their mutual attraction and jockeying for power, the contest ends in a draw.14

The next morning, Cassandra is ill. This is the first time she has experienced any kind of emotional illness. The doctor, a parody of 19th-century medical discourse who judges every woman by his deformed wife (87), tells her that “after this, you never will be quite well” (84). This illness seems to be a trope for her sexual awakening, and it equates that sexuality with being sick. And after every close encounter with Charles, she is, yes, ill. This repetitive response of illness, coupled with the doctor, who considers Cassandra a “case” (87), places her coded sexuality in the realm of excess. Even her confrontation of the wife: “I might be thinking too much of him; he is your husband, you know” (86), is presented as an unreadable indulgence of candor which Alice simply laughs off. Alice’s reaction makes her complicit in Charles’ and Cassandra’s
unconsummated affair. A woman (Cassandra) that open about her desire, to herself and others, is unthinkable.

It is easy to see the rhetoric of desire, here embodied in the poems and mythos of Byron (a man who has an incestuous marriage) and the medical discourse that espouses female desire as illness, as shaping and controlling Cassandra's experience of sexual desire. What we do not hear, perhaps because she is Cassandra and is doomed not to be heard, is her attempts to exceed the forces which try to write her desire for her. Her candor is unusual. Instead of simply seeing that candor as a mark that she is a witch (see next section) or writing it off as illegible or unintelligible as Alice does, we as readers can give her (and Elizabeth Stoddard) a multiple reading. In a fresh and exciting way, Cassandra represents and re-presents what it might be to be female, eighteen, and newly aware of sexual attachments. She does not try to veil her new feelings from herself or from others. She does not play the game of affectation, of pretending indifference to the "meal" set before her. Instead, she observes, tries to understand, even greets this new part of herself Yet her audience, her "readers" react in ways that do not help her thread her way through this new rite of passage. Alice laughs at her and discusses dresses for the ball--appropriate discourse for two women. Cassandra takes her reaction at face value. She considers it a truthful response and feels that Alice's "matter-of-fact air had blown away the cobwebs that had gathered around my fancy" (86). If Alice is not concerned, then her feelings must be okay, must not be transgressive.

Later, Charles prepares to leave on a trip. Cass sees light in Alice's chamber, but Charles claims "she is not waiting for me" (98). However, it turns out that she is, that she has made coffee for him. Cassandra is pleased with what appears to her to be an
affectionate married exchange, saying she must not be tempted to have coffee.

"Tempted!" Charles exclaimed. 'Cassandra is never tempted. What she does, she does because she will.' "'Because I will,' I repeated." In this moment, Charles throws his own temptation of her (for his very invitation to have her come live with him came after his own attraction to her) back to her and leaves it to her will. This places responsibility upon her and opens the possibility of choice and action. His trip and his comment both come after a card party where Charles’ desire for her is made clear to both Cass and her friend Helen.

Playing cards, Charles fails to trump. "He had forgotten us, and was lost in contemplation, with his eyes fixed upon me. The recognition of some impulse had mastered him. I must prevent Helen and Mr. Somers perceiving this! ... to break the spell" (91). The impulse is his desire for Cassandra, and the man who tames wild horses is no longer the master of himself. Helen and Ben Somers quickly leave; Charles hands Cass a letter from her father, but it gets crumpled as his passion for her makes him wonder if "there is any other world than this we are in now?" Cassandra sees herself in the mirror and sees a world "base, false, cowardly" as she correctly deciphers his adulterous desire for her but sees it as distorted, a mirror that is not a clear reflection or that is only a reflection. The Lacanian mirror which makes her whole, an independent self, is not an entirely readable reality. Later she dreams that the rain is "a voice which was pent up in a letter which I could not open" (93). The immediate letter written was from her father. Echoing the import of the rides with her father in Barmouth, this scene of intense male desire directed at her comes from a married male relative, standing in the place of her father while she resides in his home. If she no longer eats "so much as [she]
did in Surrey" (86), it is because the oral stage of early desire, connected as it is to the mother, has shifted to the oedipal desire for the father. Here it is now a degree away from unacceptable incest, yet it remains adultery. But Cass’ dilemma is how to read a text that cannot “opened.”

The other male card player, Ben Somers, recognizes Cassandra’s name as mythical and resonant with the gods of the Greeks. Shortly afterward he also recognizes Charles Morgeson’s interest in Cassandra, so he performs a translation from “Agamemnon of Aeschylus” (95). Cass’ one female friend throughout the entire novel, Helen—another echo of Troy (and the historical view of female desire as destructive)—tries to tell her who Agamemnon was: “‘He gave Cassandra her last ride.’ ‘Did he upset her?’ ‘Study Greek and you will know’” (95). Letters, words, inscription, language—they all hold part of the already written culturally heterosexual experience of feminine desire. It is up to Cassandra whether she can decipher the past, what is already written, in order to write her own sexual experience anew. When Helen reveals her own engagement by showing her “bracelet, printed in ink on her arm,” with her lover’s initials, Ben Somers says, “‘We may all be tattooed.’” Cassandra feels the weight of the already written, even upon her body: “‘I am,’ I thought” (97).

Ben is very attracted to Cassandra from their first meeting, but he swiftly (dis)places his desire upon her sister Veronica. His response to Cass’ evident sexuality remains implicit until he realizes much later in the novel that she is in love with his brother, Desmond. Like Alice’s response to Cass’ candor, his response is not helpful. It is not spoken (written) until his own needs (to keep her from his brother) precipitate it.
This repetition of unprofitable responses to her growth simply illustrates the inability of the people around her to face her ability to face her desire. Ben says,

\[\text{‘You have been my delight and misery ever since I knew you. I saw you}\]
\[\text{first, so impetuous, yet self-contained! Incapable of insincerity, devoid of affection, and courageously naturally beautiful. Then, to my amazement, I saw that, unlike most women, you understood your instincts, that you dared to define them, and were impious enough to follow them. You debased my ideal, you confused me, also, for I could never affirm that you were wrong; forcing me to consult abstractions, they gave a verdict in your favor, which almost unsexed you in my estimation. I must own that the man who is willing to marry you has more courage than I have. Is it strange that when I found your counterpart, Veronica, that I yielded? Her delicate, pure, ignorant soul suggests to me eternal repose.’ (226)}\]

It is not just that “eternal repose” sounds like choosing death over life. Cassandra’s willingness to look at her sexuality, observe her desires, define them and follow them “unsexes” her, makes her masculine, takes the power away from Ben. Yet, he never stops being fascinated by her: “My acquaintance with you has begun; it will never end” (93). She is with him when he dies of his alcoholism at the end of the book, so his prophecy becomes true. Christopher Felker sees Ben as Cassandra’s “nemesis” (216), but he is mistaken. He misreads the text (and I will discuss this in more detail in the next section), and he gives Ben more power than he has. Ben is weak, not only in his inability to handle Cassandra’s sexuality (and her attraction to men like Charles Morgeson and Ben’s own brother Desmond) but also in his alcoholism and his difficulty in dealing with his
own family. He gave Cassandra up, sexually, shortly after they met, but he tries to remain attached to her through his marriage to Veronica. His weakness in addressing his sexuality even forces Veronica to choose to act on her own desire. On their wedding night, he precedes her to her bedroom, and when her hair is unbound, she knocks on the door but since he never answers, she is “obliged to open it herself, and enter without any bidding” (243). Unlike Stowe’s heroines, however, Verry cannot be of use to Ben in his battle with the bottle. Veronica’s own opinion of marriage remains in play here and destabilizes the marriage plot: “She thought it strange that people should marry, and could not decide whether it was the sublimest or the most inglorious act of one’s life” (236).

During the portion of the text set in Rosville, Cassandra is figured as both blossom and horseflesh (both the things that Charles most loves), the latter in her first proposal from a marginal man who admits his whip is not long enough (116). Even as we laugh, as readers, at this double entendre, Stoddard makes it clear that he could never be a contender for a sexually awakened woman such as Cass. And Charles, master though he had been of horseflesh and blossoms, has been unmanned by his desire for her, and loses control over his latest wild horse (mad).

Charles, then—not Agamemnon, gives Cassandra her “last ride” into an inappropriate realm of desire and “upsets” her—and the carriage. After the wild ride in which Charles is killed and Cass’ face is scarred, she wants to see the dress she had worn: “It was torn through the shoulder, and the skirt had been twisted like a rope (123). The description images violent rape. Then she says, “‘That is enough. Charles broke my arm’” (123). Horses and “wild rides” (remember her mother) are tropes for sexual
activity, just as is eating. In a metaphoric sense, Cassandra appears to have lost her
virginity, broken her hymen (arm) and upon doing so, enters a state of madness. What is
more, she is now a marked/scarred woman. This scar operates as battle scar and as
scarlet letter.\textsuperscript{16}

Cassandra's own desires, and her refusal to deny them for Ben or Veronica, bring
Desmond Somers into the equation. Desmond, the reiterable, desirable male of this
novel, is first seen with a “coach whip in his hand” (163) (as we saw Locke and Charles
Morgeson before him), and he is beating his dog, as Cassandra once did her own. In
Desmond resides the conflation of Cassandra's desire for man and desire to be man (or
desire for the phallus). In one 19th-century construct of heterosexual desire, that of
domination and submission, the instability of those positions resonates between Desmond
and Cassandra. The use of synecdoche in the representation of their individual sexual
existence—her hair and his hand repeatedly standing in the place of detailed description—
creates an interesting equivalence of them both as sexual objects. She bears the scars of
her first passion on her face, won "in battle" (73). Desmond carries a woman's ring
around his neck, along with his hereditary drinking. Although his mother warns Cass that
he has used women before her, Desmond's tale, it is implied, turns the traditional rake
saga of the past on itself. He implies that he was the one deserted, and that the "she" of
the tryst is still a happy part of society. The ring is a symbol of his heart's scarring. Now
he learns from Cassandra's strength. She admitted her desire for Charles to herself, to
Alice his wife, and in the end to her father, losing him in the process. She admits to a
desire upon which she never acted; neither does her love for Desmond rush her or him
into anything precipitate. Admitting and accepting her desire, Cassandra is nonetheless
capable of holding back on action. She has matured; her appetite can now commence under her own control, not repressed, not ignored, not turned into an affectation, not belittled, and not at the mercy of the object of that desire either. In his own battle, Desmond breaks his drinking habit and breaks from his family to return to Cassandra, for a marriage between equally battlescarrad humans. The links of love between Desmond and Cassandra have "rust" on them. The chain that binds them in desire "was corroded, for it was forged out of his and my substance" (227). Cassandra does not deny her humanness, her experiences, her errors, nor does she romanticize Desmond's own demons. But by the time they are reunited, their mettle (metal) has been tested in the fires of life, "I have tried myself to the utmost" (250), and a purity has been achieved. In balancing desire and denial, choosing with maturity which desires must be destroyed, which can be enjoyed, they model for the reader possibilities beyond the rhetoric of women's fiction or Puritan texts.

Witch-Marking: Strategy for Representing Feminine Desire

Female desire is never separate from a social, religious, and even political rhetoric. The expression of desire is already defined and delimited by other forces. Carol Karlsen, in her work, Devil in the Shape of a Woman, has done an excellent study on what factors were involved in accusations of being a witch during seventeenth century New England, and desire--although the word is never used--intrinsically marks the text. In brief summary, the major factors--any of which is sufficient--for being accused of witchcraft in Puritan New England included being a woman; being an outspoken woman (especially if critical of clergy or her role in life); being over forty and therefore leaving the child bearing years; being a woman alone (widowed, single, divorced), being a
beneficiary of inheritance that thereby disrupted the male line of inheritance (whether or not the money was ever realized), being a woman who presumed to preach God’s word, being a woman whose sexuality was not repressed, being a woman healer or midwife, being the midwife who aided in a birth of a malformed or dead infant OR being the mother who birthed a malformed or dead infant, being thought guilty of abortion or spontaneous abortion (miscarriage), or being a relative (male or female) of an accused witch.

Karlsen’s study is very provocative. Simply to look at the above list is to see that women, whenever they exceeded (or complained about) the roles of mother and wife or left the realm of the domestic—which became narrower as male doctors began to take over the domain of doctoring—were at risk of being accused of witchcraft. In other terms, any exhibition of female desire or female power that is not subsumed by a man’s desire or male power is seen as evil.18

Christopher Felker19 notes the relationship between the rhetoric of witchcraft from Puritan times and Elizabeth Stoddard’s representation of a woman whose sexuality and independence from Puritan restrictions play into that rhetoric. Unfortunately, he is actually captured by the metaphors to accept Cassandra as evil and her acts of independence and her openness regarding sexual desires as signs of her evil, blaming her for Charles Morgeson’s death, her father’s “fiscal ruin,” an infant’s death in her sister’s husband’s family, and that brother-in-law’s alcoholic death: “Each of these pivotal moments owes its occurrence to the active, precipitating role of Cassandra. Mather’s own interest in witchcraft stemmed from the recognition that uncontrollable women posed a great danger to the hierarchical order of Puritan culture, which depended on
vigilant self-denial by women” (Felker 219). In that first sentence, Felker gives Cassandra a kind of occult power over her male relative’s death in a carriage accident—when he was driving the horse, power over her father’s shipbuilding enterprise when a ship does not return; power over a child’s death despite the child dying in a household in another town far away; and power over a man who is introduced as having a family tendency to drink too much. It is truly amazing! Women are so powerful when they are not kept under control. Certainly Stoddard figures the metaphor of the witch in and around Cassandra, where it also taints Veronica and is most virulently applied to Mrs. Somers, but Stoddard does not do this to make us consider Cassandra or Veronica as demonic. She also does not do this to give Cassandra strictly occult power. Cassandra’s independence does not of necessity rely upon supernatural forces, unless to be mere human and female is to be supernatural. Although there is a sense of blame placed upon Mrs. Somers in her control over the male line of inheritance, she is not portrayed as happy or as really in power—only the extension of time created by producing another male heir continues to keep money in her hands.20 That women must remain responsible for male behavior, which yes Mather may have believed, is not the real point of the novel. Stoddard is more interested in exploring the results of female independence for the woman than for the man or men. She explores even more the impediments to female desire, rather than concerning herself with impediments to male control or the hierarchical order. Felker is correct, as was Mather, in seeing that female desire and power can alter relationships between and among men and women.

Remember that Cassandra is the I we identify with, the narrator who lets us read how she gets spoken/written as “possessed” by others. The “others” who figure her so
include older women (and men), who have accepted the roles allowed them by society. Suddenly the usual polarity between the "other woman" who is the outsider who contains feminine desire as separate from, exiled from, the family and society and the "good" heroine is turned upside down and inside out. Cassandra is the "other woman" in her expression of her animal nature, her ability to see much of her religious training as a sham, her willingness to face and greet her sexual desires, her drive to achieve an independence in a home of her own even before marriage, yet because she occupies the space of first person narrator, she is also not the other woman. All other women, those who largely accept and fit into society are made the Other, placing the reader in the position of tacitly accepting Cassandra and her independence as positives.

It is only after having heard such descriptions of herself that Cass begins to internalize some of this idea of being devillike. But her acceptance of the label is tied to the freedom it allows her, not to any sense that she is truly "bad." Later scenes that invoke the supernatural do use the mesmerism and mediumship so popular in the 19th century, a way of linking a spirituality that is occult with the "evil" that Puritanism made of anything not socially and doctrinally acceptable. The definition of occult is "to shut off from view or exposure: cover, eclipse," "not revealed, not easily apprehended or understood. . not manifest or detectable by clinical methods alone" (Webster's). The definition of occult applies to virtually anything taken on faith, anything not known by our senses. This would have to include, of course, the God of the Puritans. However, as has become clear in recent years, we use the term "occult" for any spirituality which is not approved of by orthodox or "mainstream" religion. To link the occult to female desire and power then is to claim in one sense that feminine desire is not easily
understood, is often hidden or secret. To make it visible, as Stoddard does in *The Morgesons*, is to uncover that which always already exists, even if hidden or condemned. It is not just, however, to make it visible, but also to make it seem “differently.” Stoddard chooses to create in Cassandra a woman who first gains knowledge only through her senses, but who later understands more about human nature, love and the feelings inside her own body through a development of faith.

What we have here is a character whose desires can only be captured in a rhetoric descendant from a society which condemns those same desires as evil. Although Stoddard’s novel is set in the 19th century, the Puritan beginnings of New England still resonate (as in fact they still do today) in the way the people define their society and themselves. Stoddard directly addresses this in her novel with Cass’ maternal grandfather, who is a model Puritan, and the line “‘the Puritans have much to answer for in your mother’” reported to Cass by a visitor (153). Stoddard’s concern with what and how a woman inherits, and how much autonomy she has, shapes Stoddard’s treatment of family structure and personal development. Stoddard portrays a rebellious, iconoclastic protagonist striving against nineteenth-century social and religious convention toward an autonomy at once sexual, spiritual, and economic. (Buell and Zagarell, intro xix)

“That child,” said my aunt Mercy, looking at me with indigo-colored eyes, ‘is possessed’” (5) opens the novel. The narrator allows someone else’s voice to speak first and to define her the narrator as well. This demonesque epitaph is followed by the juxtaposition of both bodily satisfaction (and curiosity’s satisfaction) with moral
restrictions. Cassandra tells her mother that she hates "good" morality stories; of those she only likes the one which "makes me hungry to read" (6). Cassandra's narration, shockingly negating the "good" stories in the mode of Stowe, creates just such an appetite. It makes me hungry to read. Susan K. Harris claims that "its elliptical language, scantily cued dialogue, and fractured chronology" are some reasons its contemporary audience ignored this book. I prefer to see its narrative gaps or seams as spaces of arousal, so that reading it reenacts the desire and denial, the pain and the pleasure of the story itself. "Is not the most erotic portion of a body where the garment gapes? . . . it is intermittence . . . which is erotic . . . the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance . . . what pleasure wants is the site of a loss, the seam, the cut, the deflation, the dissolve which seizes the subject in the midst of bliss." Roland Barthes may see the pleasure of a text as tied to the site or absence of the father, as in Noah's sons seeing the father's nakedness (10), but we can see the pleasure of Stoddard's text in the site and absence, gaps and fills of desire, particularly feminine desire. Since eating is often in juxtaposition with moral or doctrinal discussion, this conjunction of desire and the control of desire is at the heart of this novel. Society, in particular, the power of the church and its Puritan inheritance, is in opposition to the satisfaction of female desire. And to have desire, whether for books that tell of explorations in other lands or for food or for independence, is to be in opposition to all the societal forces which have been set in place in order to maintain the status quo of puritan hierarchy. This is the cultural site which Felker says both Mather and Stoddard experience as "diffuse" and "dispersive" and "irreducibly problematic" (220, 226).
Cassandra's difference and therefore her break from tradition begins with her

"Taint Scriptur,"” says one character. No, Cassandra’s no Faith, Charity, or Patience; rather she is an echo of a more pagan past, the prophetess Cassandra doomed to have no one believe her true prophecies, to have people call her a witch because her prophecies are of disasters. The characters around Cass are doomed in a sense, to misread her desire or misjudge it, to misread her intentions, to misread her words. Some even want to rewrite her. When she enters Miss Black’s school, Miss Black refuses to use Cassandra’s “peculiar” name (35), calling her “C” instead. This serves to take away the first language of identity—her name. It reduces her to one syllable and “C” is not “A” quality. Later, when Cass is back in Surrey after her year in Barmouth, she is again called “possessed” and “lawless” and the villagers say she can “do anything” (60).

But one thing I know of myself then—that I concealed nothing, the desires and emotions which are usually kept as a private fund I displayed and exhausted. My audacity shocked those who possessed this fund. My candor was called anything but truthfulness. (58-59)

The people of her village misread her candor because they cannot see desire and emotion as categories of truth when spoken or expressed publicly. Her family reads her as possessed or lawless because they, too, are caught in a rhetoric which speaks of expressed desire as always already defined in negative terms. Cass laments her mother's reticence over her own desire. Noticing that for the past year her mother had left home and traveled with her husband, Cass realizes that this

“period was perhaps [Mary’s] happiest. . . Whether mother ever desired the expression of that exaltation of feeling which only lasts in a man while
he is in love, I cannot say. It was not for me to know her heart. It is not
ordained that these beautiful secrets of feeling should be revealed, where
they might prove to be the sweetest knowledge we could have” (58).

Cassandra believes that secret desires when expressed bring sweet knowledge.
But the world around her does not approve of revelation. Stoddard wisely reveals
society’s blindness by revealing what it thinks of Cassandra: “‘You are a bad girl’” (41).

Of course, a reader realizes that Miss Black is the “bad” person here, along with the
young girls in her seminary who treat Cass so cruelly. The witchcraft or marks of evil
attributed to Cassandra all come from “others,” either from the community at large or
from her own family. What they really want to say is that she does not fit in, is not
accepted, is too different, cannot erase her self to become like them.

Stoddard also uses the language of mesmerism and spiritualism to talk about
sexual unions that occur on a plane above the body but which resonate with the desire of
the body. So Charles Morgeson appears to hold Cassandra in a spell: “An intangible,
silent, magnetic feeling existed between us . . . But my feeling died or slumbered when I
was beyond the limits of his personal influence” (74). His influence cannot exceed his
presence, but when they are together there is magnetism. Since we have already
addressed the inappropriateness of this desire, both in terms of society’s limits and in
Cassandra’s development, it seems fitting that Stoddard figure this attachment as occult
magnetism. Cassandra’s openness to her newly awakening sexuality is witchlike enough,
but Charles Morgeson adds the folly of adultery to the mix. To complicate the theme of
witchcraft, Stoddard gave other factors to other women. Alice Morgeson, widow to
Charles, had until his death, very appropriately occupied herself with domestic duties—the
children, food, clothing, keeping house. After his death and her inheritance, she becomes vulnerable to the markers of witchcraft. She accepts the management of the mills and admits, "I am changed. When perhaps I should feel that I have done with life, I am eager to begin it" (125).23 As a woman with money in her own control now, Alice is marked. When Cassandra's mother dies, Cassandra becomes aware of her father's relative youth and her "exclusive right over him I felt doubtful about" (220). In fact, he will marry Alice, whose fortune helps him ride out his own insolvency until his ships literally come in. But in marrying her, he unwittingly sets his daughter out of his life, for the ghost of Charles Morgeson creates a messy nexus of desire in this foursome: father and daughter, husband and wife, husband with other's daughter, father with other's wife. And that entanglement allows Cassandra another witchlike mark—a home of her own. When she refuses to live with Alice as her stepmother, Cassandra asks her father if he will "buy this house from Ben, for me? A very small income will suffice me and Fanny, for you may be sure that I shall keep her" (247). Now, Cassandra is able to win for herself part of her father's income and thereby weaken the male line. Like Alice she becomes a threat to the hierarchy of male power through inheritance. At this same time, Ben has come into his inheritance because the youngest male heir has died. This death (the one Felker blames on Cass) has finally broken the power of the most witchlike character in the novel, Ben's mother, Mrs. Somers. Mrs. Somers lives in Belem (often seen as a name for Salem), and in this text it is a place where people's identity is attached to their money—especially women: "The Miss Hiticutts—hundred thousand apiece" (162). "Is every woman in Belem an heiress?" 'Those we talk about are, and every man is a for-tune-hunter. Money marries money; those who have none do not marry. Those who wait hope. But the great
fortunes of Belem are divided; the race of millionaires is decaying” (174). Mr. Somers
married for money and Mrs. Somers, nee Bellevue Pickersgill, had the money. This
gives her power in her marriage, so that by the time we meet Mr. Somers, he is a gouty
old man who sneaks money to his sons when he can. They all wait for the youngest male
heir to become 21 so that they can begin their lives. Mrs. Somers is a desperate woman,
despite her fortune. She is no longer young and beautiful; her children are mostly grown
and chafing at her control of the purse strings. Money and the power it supposedly has
given her have not made her happy. It is still her child-bearing that keeps power in her
hands, and now that that is past, she has little pleasure. This picture of an entire town of
female inheritors upturns the Puritan hierarchy completely. Stoddard doesn’t make this
new portrait of male and female relations any better than the original “male on top.”
Either of the two polarities creates an imbalance in male and female relationships, and
Stoddard’s goal is to create—if only on a small scale—a balanced relationship of equal
power, independence, and desire.

The other aspects of spiritualism that are formed around Cassandra are connected
to her love for Desmond Somers. When he calls her, she [rises] like an automaton to go
to him (199). Desmond even invades sister Veronica’s dreams before her wedding. She
dreams of a man like her Ben, except dark with black hair speckled in gray. This man is
carving letters out of the bark of old trees. He makes her pick up the letters and they spell
out “Cassandra Somers.” He asks her to tell Cass about the name he has spelled and
pricks Verry with his dagger. When she awakens, she has a red mark on her arm. Years
later, when Desmond does come, she recognizes him as the man in her dream. Here is
another indication of things being "written" on planes beyond the physical, of desire and
the result of desire—marriage and the changing of the woman’s name (another (re)writing) always already existing before it becomes manifest.

Images of the force of nature, aligning with Cassandra, also appear more often in the latter part of the text. “My romance, its regrets, and its pleasures, should be set in the frame of the wild sea and shores.” The sea “mingle[s] its essence” with hers (214). She maintains a “shore life,” roaming along the edge of the sea, “which looked like a vast, wrinkled serpent in the moonlight” (243).

Christopher Felker in his chapter on The Morgesons, certainly sees in Cassandra that serpent power. His argument would be more powerful, however, if he had not been blinded by his own desire to create meaning and been better able to “read” more of the text as written. He mistakes Ben Somers as Cassandra’s nemesis by not paying attention to the placement of her own reality. The quote, “All this prepared the way for my Nemesis” (60) is immediately followed by the introduction of Charles Morgeson. He is the nemesis. He has the power capable of creating some sense of destiny, some doom, while Ben remains ineffective. Ben’s offered text (Tennyson’s “Fatima”) is less telling than Charles’ poems by Byron. In fact, “Fatima . . . about a woman who must ‘possess’ a man or else die” is overturned by the fact that it is a man who wants to possess Cass so much that he dies—Charles Morgeson. Cassandra not only does not die for love of Charles, neither does she die during the over two-year gap between her discovery of her love for Desmond and their reunion. Felker confuses Ben as the “devil” Charles, and he also confuses Ben with Desmond. “‘Cassandra,’ said Desmond, ‘are you bored?’ The accent with which he spoke my name set my pulses striking like a clock. I got up mechanically, as Ben directed” (I 84). This passage is Felker’s opportunity to claim that
Ben has a power over Cass that “borders on mind control” (217). Reading the entire passage, the meaning becomes clearer. Cassandra has been deeply immersed in her first real conversation with Desmond. It is he who sets her pulses striking, not Ben. That she follows Ben mechanically only demonstrates her bewitching by Desmond. It is easy to see this staged as a film, with her following Ben automatically while her gaze remains on Desmond. It is not that Ben is no influence at all. He is a friend, but he is not the object of passion. Later, Cassandra goes to sit by Desmond at breakfast, obeying the simple nod of his head to the chair next to him, and Ben is hurt by this (194).

Another accusation which Felker levels on Cassandra is infanticide. The Somers infant dies sometime after Ben marries Veronica, freeing him to build a house and to go on drunken binges. I appreciate Felker’s reading of both a foreshadowing of infanticide (when Cass warns Alice that her child might choke to death on a handkerchief) and the conversations between Ben, Cass, and Desmond in regard to the baby. When Cass visits Belen and discovers the new heir, there is a scene in which the child is thought ill (actually teething), and Ben is sent for the doctor. Ben sees some significance in this, for if the child dies—and the brothers are obviously not much involved in this youngest siblings life—the inheritance will be distributed. Ben, informing Desmond of the illness, “look[s] hard” at him. Cass says that she hopes the child will be long-lived; Desmond does not pretend not to know what Ben is getting at: “I know what you are at, Ben,’ said Desmond. ‘I have wished the brat dead; but upon my soul, I have a stronger wish than that—I have forgotten it”’ (191, emphasis in original). Cass recalls, “There was no falseness in his voice; he spoke the truth” (191). Felker may well believe Ben’s desire to contribute to the child’s early demise, but Desmond has moved beyond it. Cass has no
need for the child's money. The lack of it has not stopped Ben from marrying Verry nor has it stopped Desmond's plan to dry out and conquer his addiction, so he can come to her. When a few years later the child is announced dead, it is by Ben upon his return from a home visit. Felker can blame Ben, but there is only wild conjecture that Cassandra is implicated.

Further in his misreading, in the scene with Mrs. Somers, Felker has Cass pick up goblet as if to throw it, when it is actually Mrs. Somers whose temper leads her to grab goblet. He also gives Helen's words to Verry in a scene set in Rosville while Veronica quietly resides in Surrey (217). Additionally, he adds the missing "e" to Rosville inscribing Roseville even when quoting. The end effect is that despite some insightful reading, Felker has paid little attention to Stoddard's text. He alters the text, the speakers, the spelling. He enacts what I argue is Stoddard's point—an inability or unwillingness to read Cassandra (or feminine desire) in its own purity. Ben, furious over her love for Desmond, admits he cannot bear to see them together. He takes up a book and bends the spine open until it cracks and Cass says, ""You would read me that way."" His answer is ""It is rather your way of reading"" (226). Ben's desire to control her, to break her spine in order to read her is re-enacted by Felker, who breaks the spine of the text without garnering the meaning written in it. In a sense Felker gives Ben what Ben wanted but didn't have the power or courage to take—control over Cassandra. Felker gives Ben what Stoddard resolutely took from him. Stoddard is very self-conscious about being read, and so she gives Cassandra this self-consciousness, too. It may be well for any text of female desire to be wary of the writing/reading, the making of meaning between the author and the text and the reader. For, according to Cassandra, ""Women do keep stupid a long
time; but I think they are capable of growth, beyond the period when men cease to grow or change’’ (237).

Conclusion

One of the reasons I find Stoddard’s The Morgesons a novel I return to again and again is the richness of her layerings or techniques. I laugh at the play she makes with tropes of illness and spirituality, illness and sexuality, at the use of the occult and witch-marking, at the pre-freudian look at mothering and desire. At the same time, Cassandra and Veronica come to life for me as representations of 19th-century women and I am fascinated by the complexities of relationships: with the mother, the father, with structures of inheritance and environment, with sisters, with the larger realm of society as it varies from space to space, with religion and education, and finally with heterosexual desire. Stoddard, so conscious of being read and misread, used a number of strategies both to represent how female sexuality and female self-construction is often seen and how it might be seen differently. With every (re)reading, I find her strategies more successful in opening up and complicating what it means to be a desiring woman.

Furthermore, I find her novel a joy to read just for fun.

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3 Baym, Nina. Women’s Fiction

4 A young woman named Caroline comes to learn tailoring from Mr. Warren. Full of joyful singing, she is “fearless” and determined to be wife to a missionary. She has an “awakening” during the revival in Barmouth and becomes severe and “forbidding” (Stoddard 46).


10 Ibid.


13 See Jacques Lacan's discussion of the phallus as representation of independent power.

14 Actually, the already already written-ness of desire is not limited to the formulation of heterosexual desire nor to feminine desire. Queer studies have investigated this, and ancient writings and traditions exist in the "non-traditional" desire relationships as well as in "traditional."

15 Along with the issue of the already written aspects of desire is the hint that in studying history, one may be able to prevent the reduplication of already written texts—at least in their destructiveness.

16 See Helena Michie’s *The Flesh Made Word.*

17 Karlsen, Carol. *Devil in the Shape of a Woman.*

18 Also the relationship of women to power in their ability to give and heal life gets figured as potentially evil in order to keep such power from becoming rampant.

19 Felker, Christopher. *Reinventing Cotton Mather in the American Renaissance.*


23 The sense that the death of a husband reinvigorates a wife is echoed in Kate Chopin’s short story, “The Story of an Hour,” among others.
Creating A Self Through (Re)Writing Friendship

“Friendship” and Letters as Strategy in Edith Wharton’s *Summer*

In the previous chapter on Elizabeth Stoddard’s novel, *The Morgesons*, I tried to capture the struggles of two sisters to create independent selves and how we might “read” the different obstacles they experienced and the achievements they attained. I concentrated my efforts on the text and its critics, rather than the author. The following project also centers on a primary text—Wharton’s novel *Summer*—and also makes use of critical sources. However, in looking at this experiment in creating a young female self-awakening, I have chosen to do more intertextual work to produce a reading that weaves three primary texts together. I am using autobiographical material, specifically Wharton’s letters to Morton Fullerton. Others before me have seen the correlation between Wharton’s love affair and the novel.¹ In addition, I am using Emerson’s essay, “Friendship.” It is my contention that Edith Wharton’s struggle to give a context to her adulterous and passionate relationship with Fullerton centered on her creative concept of friendship. She gives this same noble impulse to her protagonist, Charity Royall. I can certainly prove that Wharton read Emerson, both poetry and essays; she even quotes Emerson in her letters to Fullerton, but I am not arguing a direct influence. Rather, I am interested in how Emerson’s technique of “writing” friendship is echoed in Wharton. Further, I am interested in the ways that essentially spiritual definitions of friendship create a space for both Wharton and Charity to experience their sexual awakenings as deeply as they can despite serious obstacles of social convention and morality.

Edith Wharton died in 1937, and Irving Howe’s collection of essays published in 1962 was one of the first after her death to seriously address Wharton as a “possibly”
great American novelist. In the collection, he presents essays originally published between 1915 and 1962. The varying assessments that we get in writings across 47 years make for a dissonant picture of this author, Edith Jones Wharton. For Edmund Wilson, "There is a Puritan in Edith Wharton, and this Puritan is always insisting that we must face the unpleasant and the ugly. Not to do so is one of the worst sins in her morality . . ." (24). Yet E. K. Brown finds her "a satiric and at times an angry critic of the puritanical morality and the conventionalism of the New York in which she lived as a girl" (66). In fact, he finds her morality "not easily defined; . . . It is not religious . . . It is not humanitarian . . . It is not however purely individualistic; it is conscious of the individual's obligations to society at large" (66). At least Wilson and Brown see a moral vision, for Lionel Trilling cannot. For him, Edith Wharton "was a woman in whom we cannot fail to see a limitation of the heart, and this limitation makes itself manifest as a literary and moral deficiency of her work . . ." (138). Still, Alfred Kazin seems grateful that Wharton performed the service of "talk[ing] the language of the soul at a time when the best energies in American prose were devoted to the complex new world of industrial capitalism" (90-91). Clearly, in the first collection of critical essays addressing Edith Wharton, the American novelist, the voices are myriad, and they abound with sameness and difference, a plurality of insight into and interpretation of her vision(s).

It seems that neither Edith Wharton nor her work comes to her readers as a monolithic essence. What she gives to us is varied, mutable perhaps, depending upon our knowledge and emotions in response to her words as much as the words themselves. We are reminded again that reading does not occur in a vacuum, that it is not one pure thing which once created as text on pages or images on screens never has to be recreated or re-
envisioned. Different readers receive different Edith Whartons, different Ethan Fromes, different Lily Barts. What sustains us in making meaning of texts, however, is that although there is variety in interpretation, there is a core of stability within each reading which resonates with those that differ. And what I hope to offer in this chapter is another reading of her short novel, *Summer*, bringing to it both the connection it has to her letters to Morton Fullerton and to the definitions of friendship with which she struggled.

The use of Emerson's essay on "Friendship" may seem very arbitrary. Although Howe felt that "[t]he whole Emersonian tradition . . . was alien to her," I hope to show that in terms of defining friendship, the two—Emerson and Wharton—are not so alien (8). Whether she "believed in" or ever allowed her characters to experience or experiment with the issues of transcendence matters less than whether her texts and Emerson's text share some vibrations. The one place where I think she and Emerson could meet and have a civil (and enjoyable) conversation would be in debate about what constitutes friendship.

**DEFINING/NEGOTIATING "FRIENDSHIP"

The novel, *Summer*, is an exploration of the flowering of female sexuality and desire in soil that does not nourish the spiritual and physical expressions of an independent female sexual self. Wharton gives Charity Royall one method of self-nurturance by allowing her to create a context for her desire in the concept of friendship. And what is fascinating and valuable about this text of sexual blossoming is that desire and denial, independence and dependence are shifting categories, which resist and yet are subsumed by the overwhelming structure of societal values and conventions. In the end,
even the definitions of friendship shift and change, becoming essentially representations of the self rather than of the object of desire.

For Wharton, friendship as a category of thing is paramount—and as her letters show, it is a kind of selfless giving on one side yet a kind of expectation or desire on the other (which marks the selfless nature with self-ish-ness). For both Wharton and Emerson, writing about friendship, whether in a formal essay once given as a public oration or in an intimate letter to a lover, is the creative act. It is in the writing that friendship begins to take place. Writing creates not just a story but a story about Being. Emerson’s writing about Friendship is a part of his experience of friendship and for Wharton it is the same. Their texts create an existence. Friendship is about constituting a self as friend. Emerson says friendship is about knowing the Self. That is not to say that friendship does not have a correlating experience in the world, between two people; it just means that in the creation of texts lies the seeds of that physical experience. From the beginning of her attraction to Morton Fullerton, Wharton not only wrote letters, but also began a personal journal on him, which she eventually let him read. “Edith conceived of her journal [personal journal on MF] as a literary work—personal experience was never entirely real for her until it had been converted into literature” (Lewis 224). What Lewis says in the biography reiterates the idea that Wharton uses texts to create her experiences. Although Charity is not a writer of texts, she too experiences the inscription of concepts then given physical form.

Organizing a “reading” of three texts is always a challenge, and I have decided to establish Emerson’s theoretical stance on friendship, show how that meets Wharton’s explorations into exalted friendship, and then how that is played out in Summer. The
intent of these interlaced readings is to expand our insights. And before we enter the realm of North Dormer, I would also like to mention some background material that will give increased context to my interest in pluralities and intertextuality. I have been influenced by Foucault, especially as his discourses on knowledge, power, and sexuality have been incorporated into feminist theories of resistance. Biddy Martin finds his exposure of “categories of the natural or the normal, as well as the unnatural or abnormal . . . as social constructs . . . produced discursively” promising in questioning what is resistance and what is discipline and normalization (10). The idea that we construct what is acceptable through discourses means that we can de-construct or re-construct it to some degree. I argue that in defining and redefining the category of friendship through personal and public writing, Wharton plays with the restrictions placed upon female sexuality in a particular society at a particular time.

EMERSON AND “FRIENDSHIP”

When we investigate Emerson’s essay, “Friendship,” we find that in his theoretical explorations of the category, friendship must bear a great deal. It must be able to support the dissolution of time and space: “Let the soul be assured that somewhere in the universe it should rejoin its friend, and it would be content and cheerful alone for a thousand years” (132). Indeed, it is a union of souls most of all, thereby erasing the body to some degree. His position is also tied to a sense of possession: “Who hears me, who understands me, becomes mine,—a possession for all time” (132). But owning doesn’t necessarily mean controlling. “I am equally balked by antagonism and by compliance. Let him not cease an instant to be himself. The only joy I have in his being
mine, is that the *not mine is mine . . .*” (142 emphasis in Emerson). This possession is really an incorporation of the Other into the Self, “enlarg[ing] the meaning of all [one’s] thoughts” and making poetry flow (133). A friend, then, increases the Self and the creativity of the Self.

Emerson reserves some separation between friends, however; “I cannot make your consciousness tantamount to mine” (134). Critical to my use of Emerson’s theory is that he specifically envisions that in friendship one must write a letter, a sample of which he includes in his essay. This need to write a friend is a complex play of separation and unity because in writing we can assume that the friend is not in the presence of the writer (is disembodied for a time), yet in sharing more deeply through writing than through face-to-face discourse, we reveal more of ourselves, erasing the separation of the unknown.

To my friend I write a letter, and from him I receive a letter. That seems to you a little. It suffices me. It is a spiritual gift worthy of him to give, and of me to receive. It profanes nobody. In these warm lines the heart will trust itself, as it will not to the tongue, and pour out the prophecy of a godlier existence than all the annals of heroism have yet made good.

(Emerson 144)

Perhaps since Emerson demands two things of friendship, “Truth” and “tenderness,” it is easier to achieve both through letters rather than direct conversation (138-139). “The essence of friendship is entireness, a total magnanimity and trust. It must not surmise or provide for infirmity. It treats its object as a god, that it may deify both” (147). Such a task is difficult. Even he is skeptical: “Friendship may be said to require natures so rare
and costly, each so well tempered and so happily adapted, and withal so circumstanced .
. that its satisfaction can very seldom be assured" (141).

To keep friendship from being a weak, "compromised" thing, Emerson demands
that we need them to be "of the tough fibre of the human heart" (136) and to treat such
relationships with "the roughest courage" (137). "Let it be an alliance of two large,
formidable natures, mutually beheld, mutually feared, before yet they recognize the deep
identity which beneath these disparities unites them" (142). Indeed each must first have
developed strength of independence before they merge as friends, or it won't be an
enlarging thing but an unhappy takeover. "We must be our own before we can be
another's" (144).

In Emerson's final analysis, however, the separation—then merging—of great
friendship must become separation again. The natural cycle of growth implies that old
leaves must be shed for new (134).

The condition which high friendship demands is ability to do without it .
. We walk alone in the world. Friends, such as we desire, are dreams and
fables, [so] [I]et us even bid our dearest friends farewell, and defy them,
saying, 'Who are you? Unhand me: I will be dependent no more.' Ah!
Sees thou not, O brother, that thus we part only to meet again on a higher
platform, and only be more each other's, because we are more our own?

(142, 145-146)

Emerson prefers to keep friendship in the realm of the spirit: "It is foolish to be afraid of
making our ties too spiritual, as if so we could lose any genuine love" (145). All
"genuine love" comes to us through the spirit whether it is embodied in a particular soul
or not. The particularities matter less for Emerson, yet he identifies enough with the
particular that the merging he so admires in his own theory of friendship is nonetheless a
threat. "Then, though I prize my friends, I cannot afford to talk with them and study their
visions, lest I lose my own" (146).

Emerson’s essay on friendship is an act of creation. His use of the letter allows us
to create the self we share and the being called friend. Together these creations of
discourse seem to enlarge our world, expand our consciousness on the spiritual level.
However, this creation must remain above the blood and guts, semen and tears of real
human bodies. Even at that remove, he fears he shall lose his vision, seeing only the
particular and not the universal, by losing his particular in someone else’s.

WHARTON’S VISION(S) OF FRIENDSHIP

Edith Wharton’s novel, Summer, was published in 1917, a number of years after
her love affair with Morton Fullerton had ended. Some aspects of it may have existed
earlier, and critics who have examined the letters extant that she wrote to Fullerton
before, during, and after their romantic involvement generally agree that her experience
with Fullerton informs Summer deeply. In fact, the novel might never have existed had
not the affair occurred. In earlier works, Wharton had certainly examined relationships
of desire, in and out of marriage, but the passion that resided deep in her own being
wasn’t fully awakened until her experience with MF (as she referred to him in her diary). In
that relationship, Wharton struggles (noticeably at times) with the conflicting desires
to see her relationship with MF as a spiritual one of souls uniting, and as a friendship that
increases each one’s independence even while enriching each one’s being, and finally as
the passionate coming together of senses, touch, sight, taste. In examining her feelings and desires in the context of her relationship with MF, she constantly falls back on the term “friend.” As we will see, this term has a complex meaning for her.

According to one of her biographers, R. W. Lewis, Wharton had a “remarkable capacity for warm and enduring friendship—the quality which, almost without exception, her guests best remembered and valued about her” (148). Friendship must engage with another aspect of Wharton—her “ideal image” of a “republic of spirit,” where the keynote is freedom” (155). And when passion is added to the mix, she finds a man she thinks of as a “friend of my heart.” Although she uses this initially to indicate that she felt “our hearts and our minds met,” Lewis reminds us that the “friend of my heart” quote is a literary reference, “a mode of address by which Clelia Conti, in The Charterhouse of Parma, invites Fabrizio del Dongo after years of hesitation into her boudoir and into her bed, in the pitch darkness that permits her to keep her vow never to see him again” (208). This conscious or unconscious impulse to refer to Fullerton by a phrase used by a woman who tries to achieve both desire and denial in the same moment is telling. The ambivalence Wharton must feel about adultery combined with the passionate drive to “get” what she wants is part of the conflict behind her constant struggle to define what this friendship is.

Edith Wharton demands just as much of the category of friendship as Emerson does, but her emphasis differs. She wants the body and soul to be united. “‘There are times,’ Edith wrote to Sally Norton, ‘when I hate what Christianity has left in our blood—or rather, one might say, what it has taken out of it—by its cursed assumption of the split between body and soul’” (Lewis 230). In some ways, her use of letters to create
her friendship with Morton Fullerton is less to use distance in creation of the ideal (Emerson’s impulse I think) than to use distance to embrace the body and its needs; in “warm lines the heart will trust itself, as it will not to the tongue” (Emerson 144).

Do you know what I was thinking last night, when you asked me, & I couldn’t tell you?—Only that the way you’ve spent your emotional life, while I’ve—bien malgre moi—hoarded mine, is what puts the great gulf between us . . . And I’m so afraid that the treasures I long to unpack for you, that have come to me in magic ships from enchanted islands, are only, to you the old familiar red calico & beads of the clever trader . . . I’m so afraid of this, that often & often I stuff my shining treasures back into their box, lest I should see you smiling at them! (Letters 134-135)\(^{11}\)

Writing to Fullerton gives Wharton more power to open herself to her body and its needs, to address her fears that his experience will laugh at her inexperience. Early in her letters, she appropriates Emerson by quoting him, saying it is a text “for you & me—

‘The moment my eyes fell on him I was content’”(Letters 129-130).

Contentment is a transitory emotion in this relationship, as the letters reveal, but it is the beginning of her created relationship in writing. And in the beginning, Wharton most wants to uplift Morton Fullerton into the “finer” man he is meant to be (Letters 133). She is “afraid—so afraid—of seeming to expect more than you can give, & of thus making my love for you less helpful to you” (144). And what she most enjoys in one of his letters “is the word ‘camaraderie.’ I was never sure you cared for it, or felt it . . . that you thought I gave it . . .” (148 emphasis & ellipses in original). And she clearly tells Fullerton that “I chose the risk, I accept the consequences.” And that is what I will
always say” (156). In telling MF that she recognizes “perfect freedom in loving and in un-loving,” her condition is that “you & I become, again in our talk & our gestes, the good comrades we were” (180). The gift of a new dimension to her life—physical passion with a man she could also converse with on her favored intellectual level—“has given me all imaginable joy. Nothing can take it from me now, or diminish it in my eyes, save the discovery that what has set my whole being free may gradually, imperceptibly, have become a kind of irksome bondage to you” (189). His attentions have “enlarged her” and she wants to do the same for him. Even as Emerson believes that friendship feeds the writing of poems, Wharton finds herself also producing poems, fed by her adoration of Fullerton (Lewis 206, 227, 234). Her work never suffers because of her love affair; rather, it is increased and enlivened.

However, even in her no-strings affair with Fullerton, there are power struggles over the discourse that largely creates the relationship. The difficulty that brings the most tension to her letters to MF is his tendency to heat up the relationship, cool it down and heat it up again. As Wharton wavers between a passion that is not founded in friendship (simply naked desire) and a definition of friendship that can sustain her for years to come, she finds his shifts confusing: “I don’t know what you want, or what I am!” According to Lewis, her “self-assurance” in her sense of self as an author and a woman was dissolving and “now she was wondering a little appalled, whether it might not be the destiny of women to find their individuality blotted out by love” (Lewis 218). For Wharton, “consistency of affection is a fundamental part of friendship” (207).

The resulting struggle sometimes comes out as a kind of extortion (which we watch Charity exhibit in the novel). Even as Wharton struggles to create a claim of
freedom for both Fullerton and herself, this theme of extortion resounds in her letters primarily as she calls for the return of her letters, which she does throughout the relationship. She seems to want to extort or gain some commitment from him and she seems to fear that he may extort something from her at a later date by use of her letters. 12 “I beg instant cremation for this” (Letters 139) or better yet, “Just put my notes & letters in a bundle & send them back” (158), but then again, “Oh, I don’t want my letters back, dearest!” (162), but later if he is to return them, “the best way of making sure they come straight into my own hands would be to register them” (170). She calls for their return whenever she feels he has distanced himself from her, and backs off the moment he enters into the relationship again. The same words that express her desire become dangerous to her because writing presupposes an audience, a reader who can misread or misuse what is written. This resonates with Emerson’s issue of possession—that what a friend has to offer becomes part of the one receiving it. This loss of self on the part of the giver is very frustrating for Wharton.

Discourse is important because Edith fears being driven “straight back into [her] dumb former self, the self that never believed in its chance of having any warm personal life” (Letters 138). That self could not choose its experience, but in the relationship with MF, Wharton is choosing to expand into a woman who loves in her body’s passion and loves in friendship’s benevolence simultaneously. It seems fairly obvious that Wharton knows this affair will not last, so it is important that she create the frame of friendship. This makes it a nobler endeavor than strictly giving into sordid passion. It also allows her to extend the relationship beyond the end of physical relations. “I had hoped that our friendship—so dear to me!—might survive” (160). From the very beginning, she is
grateful that his attentions “woke me from a long lethargy, a dull acquiescence in conventional restrictions, a needless self-effacement” (161). But she knows the spaces she has created within her letters and in her relationship with him have their limits. They shall never marry.

And when you spoke of your uncertain future, your longing to break away & do the work you really like, didn’t you see how my heart broke with the thought that, if I had been younger & prettier, everything might have been different—that we might have had together, at least for a short time, a life of exquisite collaborations— (161)

The loss expressed here we see echoed in Summer. She cannot have the storybook romance; she will not be Mrs. Morton Fullerton. She cannot rewrite her history, and there is a limit to her ability to create her future—primarily because one does not create one’s future in a vacuum. The Other(s) one might desire to include is also making his or her plans. It is easier to control the lives of characters in fiction than one’s own life. But Wharton is so honest with herself and her material that, even in rewriting her affair in the novel Summer, she writes her heroine an experience as complex and human as her own.

I said once that my life was better before I knew you. That is not so, for it is good to have lived once in the round, for ever so short a time. But my life is harder now because of those few months last summer, when I had my one glimpse of what a good camaraderie might be—the kind of thing that some women have at least for few years! . . As soon as I can get a rest, & rebuild, my will to live will come back, & with it my resources.

(216 emphasis in original)
In Emerson’s writing of friendship, the friends meet, merge, and then separate again. Wharton’s text circles around that cycle as in a spiral—not one cycle but many, each different. To Fullerton she says that “at present, in the whole universe I see but one thing, am conscious of but one thing, you, and our love for each other” (145). However, as Lewis tells us in his introduction to her letters (and as her letters bear witness), during her affair with MF, Wharton worked with her “usual zeal on short stories, travel articles, a novel, and several translations” (122) and she also “kept up a full a varied social life” (122). Of course, Wharton had many more resources than she gave Charity, but while she may have had many more things to fill her days, accomplishments, and talents all her own, her feeling of friendship for MF seems to dominate her life at this time—as it later dominates Charity’s. By fastening on the category of friendship within which to frame her relationship to Morton Fullerton, Wharton was able to overcome her responsibility to the mores of her conventional society. This allowed her the freedom to experience physical passion previously unknown. And although the relationship moved in and out of that merging state—as Emerson suggests friendship must, she managed to retain it in an acceptable form long after their bodies stopped coming together. By extending the years of (often written) friendship with MF, she is able to conceive of herself as someone who gives up her own expectations yet continues to give of herself to the object of desire—her “friend of the heart.”

**SUMMER: WRITING FEMALE DESIRE AND FRIENDSHIP**

In *Summer*, Wharton presents two different types of friendship. The first is the one directly written about in that term—friendship. It is the idealistic exploration Charity
makes in her love affair with Lucius Harney, an opportunity for her to create within herself the capacity to give, in the end, without expectations. Written alongside Charity’s text is the text of a very different kind of friendship, less idealistic, more realistic, born in pain and practice rather than theory. This is the friendship that Lawyer Royall has to offer her throughout the entire novel. His capacity to give is never granted the fine adornment of innocence and first love and flowering that Charity’s love is. Rather, it is timeworn, tested and testy, but it appears without fail throughout the novel, mixed up though it is with desire that is not without expectations.

“A girl came out of lawyer Royall’s house”(7), and in this moment we meet our protagonist, not named for several more paragraphs, and even when named, given the appellation the lawyer gave her, rather than a name chosen by a mother or a father. We are set to sympathize with this girl—despite the distancing of the third-person narrator—because of the failure to give her the one thing we all rest our identities in—a name, and because she is “constricted” by the happy face she sees on a strange young man. That another’s freedom to express such happiness causes pain in Charity tells us more clearly than anything else that Charity does not feel she belongs. Indeed her primary desire for the position of librarian (and her justification why she should receive it) is because she says, “I wanted it more’n anyone in the village, because I haven’t got anybody belonging to me, the way other folks have” (49). Meeting Lucius Harney forces her to examine her life, her position, and her physical body—to consider or become aware of obstacles. “She had become absorbingly interesting to herself” (59). These re-evaluations echo strongly of Wharton’s, only couched in terms of class, education, and traditional values of beauty, rather than in age differences and marriage. Charity belongs nowhere, and that
leaves her economic position ambivalent. And although Harney is obviously attracted to her and she knows this, she is no classic blue-eyed, blond beauty (like Annabel Balch, a girl who has lots of clothes, blue eyes, and moves between Nettleton and North Dormer—a girl with mobility and money, an appropriate girl). Despite her ambivalent position, however, Charity has been able, in her callous youthfulness, to express power in her home.

Charity may not have blue eyes and frocks with lace, but Lawyer Royall “ruled in North Dormer; and Charity ruled in lawyer Royall’s house” (23). She rules, she thinks, because she understands the “rules” (unwritten law). She accepts that the lawyer brought her down from the Mountain when she was five and christened her Charity to forever remind her of the debt. But he did not adopt her, and when his wife dies, he looks into a boarding school for her (at the suggestion of Miss Hatchard, the arbiter of appropriate norms). That this effort sends him into a “black” mood, Charity believes is because he didn’t want to lose her:

He was a dreadfully “lonesome” man; she had made that out because she was so “lonesome” herself. He and she, face to face in that sad house, had sounded the depths of isolation; and though she felt no particular affection for him, and not the slightest gratitude, she pitted him because she was conscious that he was superior to the people about him, and that she was the only being between him and solitude. (25)

Clearly, Charity gains her knowledge through experience and association. Because she is lonesome, she can see that quality in someone else. This is how she “reads” things, through the lens of her experiences. Another reason why Charity perceives herself as
having power in her relationship with Royall is that she believes she knows why he
returned to North Dormer rather than remaining in the bigger world of Nettleton. It is
tied to his wife, and she feels that “something bitter happened to him” and understanding
that (after all, somehow her life has given her something bitter, too—this not belonging to
anyone, being a “Charity” case) gives her power over him. The final reason is that when
she reaches the age of 17, and Royall comes home drunk, he comes to her bedroom. She
thinks he has come for the key to the liquor cabinet, which she has taken to hide from
him, but when she realizes he wants her, she feels distaste rather than fear. Royall begs
and is refused. In giving into his impulse, lawyer Royall now feels humiliated and allows
Charity even more power within the household, after she refuses his proposal of
marriage.

The power Charity feels is akin to one of blackmail. She feels that her
understanding of Royall, seeing beneath his public façade as the man who rules North
Dormer, gives her power over his vulnerability. This is a very adolescent position, one
not softened by genuine compassion, something Charity hasn’t developed yet. And
interestingly, in terms of micro-powers, although lawyer Royall defines Charity as an
object of desire, it is she who feels empowered by that rather than the man. This
overturns the patriarchal structure of desire with “man on top,” but it does not make
Charity a better individual or self. Her tendency toward extortion fits societal structures
of commodities, buying and selling, and holds no relationship to the ideal of friendship
she later tries to create. It does, however, echo with Wharton’s struggle with that very
tendency.
Charity has not had any flirtations with the local boys, holding herself “contemptuously aloof from village love-making” (61), and her knowledge or understanding of desire is superficial. She will not know or understand it until she has experienced it. By choosing to create a female protagonist who is essentially inarticulate, with a very narrow experience of the world, Wharton narrows in on the body (and the senses) as Charity’s source of knowledge and wisdom. But she gives her the same impulse toward a noble category to define what she begins to experience with Lucius Harney. Young Harney is an architect doing research for a book on colonial houses, and he decides to explore the area around North Dormer. Attracted to Charity, he remains quite gentlemanly toward her but takes no notice that in asking her to drive him to various locales he places her at risk of community censure. In Nettleton it is known that he is engaged, but she does not know this, and he chooses to remain silent. He is a man who knows how society works, so his silence and his being alone with her are rather deliberate evasions of the conventions of morality of the time. Charity, too, understands how society works and develops “a terror of exposing to vulgar perils the sacred treasure of her happiness” (62). This means it is imperative for her to try to define this relationship.

Since “everybody knew that ‘going with a city fellow’ was a different and less straightforward affair” that often created a victim, Charity clearly understands how others may view her time with Harney (63). Charity feels that although he has never “spoken a word of love to her,” there is “an undercurrent as mysterious and potent as the influence that makes the forest break into leaf before the ice is off the pools” (74-75). Part of her can acknowledge the abyss that “education and opportunity” opens up between them,
and there is evidence that he exists in an entirely different world when he leaves North Dormer, that there are “unseen influences” (she even suspects that Annabel Balch is one of them) (96-97).

Once lawyer Royall sees what is happening, he ends the agreements to board Harney and to rent him a buggy—two deals that brought him some needed income. This could serve to break Charity’s non-affair before she can get hurt or before the town talks about her. What happens after that, however, convinces the town that she has given into desire in the most inappropriate way. Yet the affair remains unconsummated.

The intense scene Wharton creates where Charity appropriates the “male gaze” and watches Harney without his knowledge, giving into the desire to simply take him in without contact, is the turning point of the novel. Charity observes his half-packed luggage, sees his “self-disgust” and “grief” (103, 105). She knows that if she knocks on the window, he will welcome her and they will have sex: “It was the thing that did happen between young men and girls . . . It was what . . . every girl of Charity’s class knew about before she left school. It was what had happened to Ally Hawe’s sister Julia. . . .” (105). Her ruminations take her straight to the girl who has had an abortion and who now lives in Nettleton and of whom no one ever speaks. But Charity has thought about Julia’s fate and feels that there are worse ones. Nonetheless, she is motivated to “do nothing to deface the image of her that he” would take with him (106), so she watches until he falls asleep, then she goes home.

Later, lawyer Royall informs Charity that the town is talking about her. She mistakenly blames him for it, struggles not to care what the town thinks, but is so hurt by “all this fingering of her dreams!” (114)
"No. . . . It's not that I care what any of you say . . . but you may as well know. Things ain't between us the way you think . . . and the other people in this place. He was kind to me; he was my friend; and all of a sudden he stopped coming, and I knew it was you that done it—you!" (114 emphasis and ellipses in original)

In that moment, she uses the term "friend," and it seems to be clear that Harney is the first being who has ever represented that to her. And at the very moment of her claim, she is reminded by Royall that "if he'd wanted you the right way he'd have said so" (116). Hearing this from Mr. Royall increases Charity's "bitterness," and she cannot respond to his own offer of marriage—"nothing in his appeal reached her heart" (117). So he offers to force Harney to marry her. "I don't want any chance you can give me: I'm glad he's going away" (119).

Although Wharton ends that chapter with Charity receiving a "meet me" note from Harney, the next chapter creates a jump in time that has to be revealed later by the third person narrator. Charity is happy; "[s]he had a friend whom she trusted and who respected her. She was going with him to spend the next day—the Fourth of July—at Nettleton" (125). Although she justifies her secret adventure with Harney as a declaration of "independence," it is actually that she does not want anyone to judge her affair, to "profan[e] her happiness" (126).14 She doesn't want others to define what her relationship is. She now feels that they have a "private language" that keeps society's definitions from intruding. In fact, it is Harney's use of "friendship" that moves their relationship further along. "When Charity, in response to Harney's message, had gone to meet him at the Creston pool her heart had been so full of mortification and anger that his
first words might easily have estranged her. But it happened that he had found the right word, which was one of simple friendship” (128). In offering her friendship, Harney got to keep Charity as his guide on trips through the hills, “in happy comradeship” (129). All of the trips Charity and Lucius Harney take are reminiscent of Edith Wharton and Morton Fullerton’s motoring trips. Wharton and Fullerton spent a good number of their moments together on motoring trips (with or without others such as Henry James) because traveling by car was one of Wharton’s passions. Searching out art, gardens, sights, etc. was a passion of hers that she transfers somewhat to Harney in this novel. These moments are often referred to in Wharton’s letters to MF, and they appear to have been precious to her. She makes this fortnight of roaming that Lucius and Charity have (the time between his supposed leaving of the area and the actual consummation of their relationship) particularly rich for Charity. Harney “never put his arm about her,” but “his pleasure at being with her . . . shone in his eyes” (129-130).

With the sense of a private language and this respect shown her body, Charity feels she is being treated as his equal in class, but this is dispelled throughout the day in Nettleton, where she once again perceives a great distance between them that prevents their relationship from lasting. “Harney would never buy her an engagement ring: they were friends and comrades, but no more” (143). When in the darkness between fireworks, Harney finally kisses her, she feels that “an unknown Harney had revealed himself, a Harney who dominated her and yet over whom she felt herself possessed of a new mysterious power” (149).

Before she can sort out how this alters their relationship or her definition of friendship, Mr. Royall sees her with Harney and publicly and drunkenly calls her a
“whore” (151). Here she is face to face with society’s definition. Interestingly, her impulse is to try and take Mr. Royall home, away from disreputable (?) women, but she leaves with Harney, who only sees her part-way home. At a crucial moment, he seems to lack somewhat in what it means to be a friend. The following day, Wharton continues to use the language of friendship for Charity to express her despair: “Her dream of comradeship was over; and the scene on the wharf—vile and disgraceful as it had been—had all shed the light of truth on her minute of madness . . . and proclaimed to the world the secret admonitions of her conscience” (160).

To bring Lucius Harney and Charity back together again, Wharton creates an action sequence. Charity runs away from home, comes into contact with a traveling gospel tent that offers her redemption she doesn’t want, runs into Harney, cries that she wants him to leave her alone and that she won’t go home because Mr. Royall desires her. Making it seem as if Mr. Royall would make a whore of her (which is simply untrue), Charity kindles two desires inside of Harney. He wants to protect her, and he wants her for himself. As the two young people move beyond friendship into the realm of physical passion, Charity finds herself in total “acceptance of his will” despite a clear sense that she had the stronger character (175). (This clearly resonates with Wharton and her affair.) To please him, however, she returns home to Mr. Royall. Charity now thinks in a broader category for friendship, believing herself to be “the only being on earth who really knew him,” and that belief protects her because it again frames their relationship in idealistic terms that other, more ordinary, people will misunderstand. She feels a new self unfolding (Emerson and Wharton both felt that). And “more wonderful, at first, than Harney’s endearments were the words that were a part of them. She had always thought
of love as something confused and furtive, and he made it as bright and open as the summer air” (180). Creating an openness, a nobleness about their love and friendship through his discourse, Harney gets the girl. Morton Fullerton, by the way, was notorious for espousing such a uniting of souls in his many physical relationships with women, that very few ever felt angry with him once the affair was over. Fullerton kept some part of their fondness forever. It may have been that he opened them to a new world, as Wharton has Harney do for Charity (182). In fact, Charity begins to lose her sense of self, holding her life in abeyance when he is away from her. Part of the myth of Harney’s friendship with her is destroyed, however, when she sees him with Annabel Balch. Behind the frail screen of her lover’s caresses was the whole inscrutable mystery of his life: his relationships with other people—with other women—his opinions, his prejudices, his principles, the net of influences and interests and ambitions in which every man’s life is entangled. Of all these she knew nothing. (197)

While all the complications that were Harney’s life were kept from her, “[s]he had given him all she had” (198). Still their affair continues. Only when Mr. Royall finds out about it does Harney mention the idea of marrying, but first he must leave. He’ll come back, he says. “His reiterated promises to return seemed almost wounding. She had no doubt that he intended to come back; her doubts were far deeper and less definable” (212). Cynthia Griffin Wolff notes that “their relationship is conducted entirely outside the boundaries of social customs and community sanctions” (409), and his leaving brings this back into Charity’s consciousness.16
At this point letters enter as the link between Charity and Harney. Unlike Wharton’s experience of creating and shaping a relationship, even arbitrating it, Charity finds that words on a page distance her from her experience. Remember, Wharton created in Charity someone who learns primarily through her senses rather than through intellectual resources. That is not to say that anyone, including Wharton, could not feel as Charity does the sense of the first letter from Harney as “coming from immeasurable distances and having lost most of its meaning on the way” (214). Neither, too, does it seem strange that she feels an “inability to express herself” (214), writing him instead letters that “were never put on paper” (220). She forces herself to write once she knows that he is engaged to Annabel Balch, releasing him from his promise to her because “I’d rather you acted right” (221). This remains a key line when she discovers her pregnancy, for then she feels she has the “sovereign right” to him and clearly expects him to “act right” (228). But a missive from him stops her. Her sense of the higher realm, of friendship, returns. She has “made it easier for him” by releasing him, and that fits the concept of self-sacrificing friendship. If she calls him back, however, she enters the realm of those who were married, according to North Dormer morality, “to make things right,”” the fate she thought worse than Julia’s. She has to face that her playing with the ideal of soul friendship never created a permanent space for her love affair: “In the established order of things as she knew them she saw no place for her individual adventure . . .” (235 ellipses in original).

We have seen how Wharton gave Charity the concept of friendship to frame her attachment to Lucius Harney and how releasing him was the last thing she could do in the spirit of friendship. But as I said before, there is another model of friendship being
written alongside the self-awakening Charity was experiencing. In fact, Charity can not read it as friendship and because of that, we as readers have had difficulty with that as well. Some feminist critics have discussed the incestuous nature of Mr. Royall's desire for Charity, the hateful name he gave her, and the bleak ending with Charity unable to escape structures of patriarchal desire and the conventions of morality. Other critics have admired lawyer Royall:

Lawyer Royall is flawed, far from perfect, a man who has never accomplished the things his talent and intelligence suggest he might have.

On the other hand, he is a man of profound decency and kindness, a discerning man—even a man of extraordinary passions. When Wharton's friend, . . . Bernard Berenson, expressed admiration for the characterization of lawyer Royall, Wharton exclaimed, "Of course, he's the book." (Wolff, Intro xv)

Wharton uses Royall as the model for a friendship that is both noble and human. Since the lawyer never uses the word "friend," and Charity doesn't either in reference to him until the very end of the novel, how can I claim that he is a model friend? Through his actions and words we get to see living friendship, not created in letters or in poems but in living. He is a man who, as much as possible, has lived up to his convictions and standards. He gets a man from the Mountain, the territory of outlaws, "sent up" for manslaughter, yet is willing to go up the Mountain after that (when others said the people there would kill him) and bring down a five-year-old girl. The convict had "wanted her brought down and reared like a Christian" (73). Royall not only goes and gets her, but he provides her with a home and raises her. Charity feels that she was "christened Charity . .
... to commemorate Mr. Royall's disinterestedness in 'bringing her down,' and to keep alive in her a becoming sense of her dependence ..." (24). But we can look at his decision in other ways. He specifically agreed to raise the girl as Christian, and although he felt no need to adopt her or pretend to be her father, he honors the request as best he can. The choice of Charity for a name is both one that creates a sense of obligation, but also one in the Christian tradition (and New England naming tradition) that means "divine love."

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up. Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. . . And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity. (I Corinthians 13: 4-7, 13)

Another way of looking at her name then is to see Charity as love, strength, and endurance. From that point of view, it is a beautiful name, and since we do see how much Royall loves Charity, it seems appropriate. There is also some sense that Charity has begun to develop those very qualities by the end of the novel.

The one time Royall came to her room drunk, he was easy to repel. The very next day, sober, he tells her, "I want you to marry me" (33), but Charity makes fun of him, calling him ugly and cheap. Later she sees how much he enjoys talking with Lucius Harney. In fact, she "divined that the young man symbolized all his ruined and forgotten past," which serves to make him an older, wiser, slight-broken Lucius Harney (68). At this point she also becomes aware that Royall may not be so much "tight" with money as
“poorer than people knew” (69). We’ve already seen that he quickly gave up the income from Harney in order to save Charity from getting hurt. When he thinks she has spent much of the evening with Harney in his aunt’s house, Royall breaks down, “You lost girl ... you...” (112). He once again offers her his name,

‘For all your sneers and your mockery you’ve always known I loved you the way a man loves a decent woman ... If you’ll marry me we’ll leave here and settle in some big town, where there’s men, and business, and things doing. It’s not too late for me to find an opening ... Charity—Charity—say you’ll do it,’ she heard him urge, all his lost years and wasted passion in his voice. (116-117)

Once again Charity rejects him. That is why it shows a surprising change that when Royall sees her with Harney at the end of the Fourth of July celebration and calls her a whore, her instinct is to reach out and take him home. From her past rejections of him, a reader might expect her to want to get away from him. That foreshadows her slow appreciation of his qualities. At the North Dormer Old Home Week festivities, Charity listens to Royall’s oration, noting that he has a “grave and impressive demeanor” (192), and a “rolling music [to] his voice” (193). She actually begins to hear what he says as he speaks as one who has left North Dormer only to return and stay,

‘My history is without interest, but it has its lesson ... Things [young people] cannot foresee may send some of those young men back some day to the little township and the old homestead; they may come back for good ... For good. There’s the point I want to make ... North Dormer is a poor little place ... perhaps, by this time, it might have been a bigger
place, . . . if those who had to come back had come with that feeling in
their minds—that they wanted to come back for good . . . the fact that we
had failed elsewhere is no reason why we should fail here . . . after a while,
I believe you’ll be able to say, as I can say today: “I’m glad I’m here.”
Believe me, all of you, the best way to help the places we live in is to be
glad we live there.’ (195)

Charity not only hears his insights but hears the judgment of one of the few men she
admires, Rev. Miles, “‘That was a man talking—’” (195 emphasis and dash in original).
Wharton conjuncts Mr. Royall’s humblest and most honorable moment with the moment
when Charity sees Harney with Annabel Balch and faints. The honor and honesty we just
heard from Royall do not reverberate in Harney.

That honor is tested when Royall finds the love nest, the broken-down house that
Harney and Charity make love in. He tells Charity, “‘All I know is I raised you as good
as I could, and meant fairly by you always—except once, for a bad half-hour. . . . Seems to
. . . give me some sort of right; the right to try and keep you out of trouble” (205). He
confronts Harney as to why he hasn’t asked her to marry him, blaming Harney’s
disrespect on Charity’s background, daughter to a mother up on the Mountain. Later,
when Charity realizes she cannot call Harney back, for that would destroy her newly
developed vision of friendship, she runs away to the Mountain for refuge. She is in time
for her mother’s funeral, and she gets a clear sense that this “free” place is not free at all;
it has its own herd instincts, and she can now understand why her mother gave her up.
Those on the mountain “have neither material civilization nor moral tradition” (Leavis
84), so the Mountain cannot be her refuge. Mr. Royall drives up the Mountain to get
her—for the second time in her life, while knowing that she ran away from him, knowing that she has been “ruined” by Harney.

... it occurred to her for the first time that to reach the top of the Mountain so early he must have left North Dormer at the coldest hour of the night, and have travelled steadily but for the halt at Hamlin; and she felt a softness at her heart which no act of his had ever produced since he had brought her the Crimson Rambler because she had given up boarding-school to stay with him. (266)

As always, Mr. Royall asks her to marry him, “I’ll never feel any way but one about you ... Come to my age, a man knows the things that matter and the things that don’t” (270-271). Charity begins to achieve a state of “peace and security” in Royall’s presence (273). And although the “mists of her dreams had hidden him” (276), after they are married, it is the “same expression of grave friendliness that had reassured her on the Mountain” that allowed her a “glimpse of another being” (275) who she can now see as “good, too” (291 emphasis added). And if Charity must return to North Dormer, she can return “for good” as lawyer Royall did years before.

CONCLUSION

Emerson and Wharton, in the very writing of friendship, create both the relationship and the self and other that make up that relationship. This implies a great deal about the inscriptions of relationships and how writing is a (re)writing. Using spiritual definitions of friendship combined with letter writing allows them to not only shape the relationship but also negotiate the power structures within the relationships. Emerson uses the letter to distance the body while “merging” the soul, the mind.
Wharton uses the letter's distance to engage the body's needs with those of the soul or mind. By defining friendship at the spiritual level, cycles of union and separation, they are as much concerned with creating themselves as friend in the experience of friendship as they are in actually enjoying the friendship of the Other. Friendship as a framing device allows Wharton to justify to herself an adulterous love affair that wakes her to herself as a sexual being. She uses that same impulse with Charity, allowing Charity her first love, the one that is bittersweet, the one that prepares her for the more mature friendship and love she can share with Mr. Royall. As a way of writing a sexually-awakened self, friendship creates an impermanent space for experience. It lasts long enough before it has to be re-defined to achieve its purpose.

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1 See biographies by R. W. B. Lewis and Cynthia Griffin Wolff.


3 Wilson, Edmund. "Justice to Edith Wharton."

4 Brown, E. K. "Edith Wharton."

5 Trilling, Lionel. "The Morality of Inertia."

6 Kazin, Alfred. "Edith Wharton."


12 And she knows this can happen in a love affair, since a past lover of Morton Fullerton does just that to him, threatening to reveal letters indicating a homosexual love affair in particular. Although Fullerton never really pays off, the threat and the relationship with that woman are extended for years.

13 It is largely in Charity’s inability to follow Harney’s discourse that we see the gap of their understanding and class. She cannot follow his language, his allusions; they make her feel left out. An excellent discussion of how Wharton uses language to show lower-class women’s burden is found in Elsa Nettels’ book, Language and Gender in American Fiction. Charlottesville, VA: UP of Virginia, 1997.

14 This instance of the conjunction of the Fourth of July and our Declaration of Independence and how women have used that conjunction in fiction is worth looking at. See Barbara Bardes and Suzanne Gossett’s work, Declarations of Independence: Women and Political Power in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction. London: Rutgers UP, 1990.

15 Sources for Morton Fullerton’s relationships with myriad women include R. W. B. Lewis’ biography of Edith Wharton, Cynthia Griffin Wolff’s biography, A Feast of Words, and Lewis’ collection of Wharton’s letters.


Creating Possibilities: Female Selves, Self Reliance, and Faith

Typology and Direct Address as Strategy in

Catherine Maria Sedgwick’s Hope Leslie

Catherine Maria Sedgwick published Hope Leslie in 1827; it was her third novel. In the nineteenth century, her work was greatly admired, and she was ranked with Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and William Cullen Bryant. The Cyclopaedia of American Literature excerpts her work, and in American Lands and Letters, her contribution is seen as “significant” (Kelley xi).¹ As happened to many 19th-century women writers, Sedgwick’s reputation was devalued and she became “a footnote” in 20th-century records (Kelley xii). As Mary Kelley has noted, “Hope Leslie remains the impressive literary embodiment of an investigation into the roots of American moral character, particularly into what it meant in America to be a moral woman” (xiii, emphasis in original). Kelley also feels that the two threads woven into the novel combine the “narrative of Indian displacement” with an “investigation of both American and female character” (xxi). She sees the characters of Hope Leslie and Magewisca as “foils” to the traditional female roles, with characters such as Esther and Madam Winthrop in opposition. I understand and value her insights along this line. I would argue, however, that even the relatively minor female characters all serve another purpose. Sedgwick is creating multiple feminine selves to open up the definition of what it means to be a woman. To center only on Hope and Magewisca is to lose what is respected and valued in the other female characters. Not only does Sedgwick create space around the definition of what it means to be a woman, particularly a “moral
woman," but she also—at the same time—opens up what it means to be an exemplar of faith. This is the one extremely important element of Sedgwick’s writing that, although it has been acknowledged, has not been thoroughly explored.²

Sedgwick uses devices more familiar to her audience of the 1800s than to 20th-century readers: patterning or modeling and direct address. She sets her novel back in early 17th-century America. As the Puritans she writes about used typology to study types of moral beings, Sedgwick uses the term “pattern” to do the same in creating her moral women. It is first directly applied to Madam Winthrop, who “was held up as a sort of pattern throughout New-England” (121, emphasis added), but the word reappears throughout, and if we apply it to each of the women in turn, we have a number of different patterns. If we rid ourselves of the characters Sedgwick least admires or respects, we still find remaining, a number of different patterns whose hearts, nonetheless, are the same—written in faith. In the following work, we will be looking at the patterns created by the varying female characters.

Another technique or strategy that Sedgwick uses is direct address by the persona of her narrator. The narrator clarifies what the reader should think about the actions just occurring. It is through this narrative voice that Sedgwick gets her audience to suspend too hasty a judgment toward characters they might dismiss as impossible. She foresees prejudices and disarms the reader of them, whether they be racial (against the idea that an Indian maiden could be as noble as Magawisca) or religious (against Magawisca’s faith or Roslin’s or even Hope’s) or simply behavioral (Hope’s rash behaviors). Further, her use of quoted epigraphs for each chapter adds to the voice of the narrator to make the reader pause and consider the narrator’s point of view before dismissing it. Sedgwick
does a masterful job of creating women who do not entirely fit the assumptions of either 19th- or 17th-century womanhood and whose moral decisions are often self-reliant rather than reliant on outside authority. Then, because faith is such an important component in each of the women, yet embodied differently in each, Sedgwick also creates multiple portrayals of faithful, moral characters. These portrayals explode the one-dimensional models usually created by moralists and allow for variation.

A “PATTERN THROUGHOUT NEW ENGLAND”

Madam Winthrop is treated as a complex model in Hope Leslie. It is through the narrator that we see how difficult it is to accept her as a perfect pattern, yet her nobility is not really questioned. “She recognised, and continually taught to matron and maiden, the duty of unqualified obedience from the wife to the husband, her appointed lord and master; a duty that it was left to modern heresy to dispute....” (144). Her appearance raises one of the questions of 19th-century life. According to Cathy N. Davidson, in her work Revolution and the Word, a topic of the 19th century was the merit of female education and the issue of whether education affected marriageability, since marriage is one of the few choices women have, one of the last, in fact, because once married, under the law of couverture, they become hidden, allotted only what privilege comes with the husband’s position and his dispensation, without a legal definition of their own. The discussion opens on whether woman is to be “submissive helpmeet” or “equal partner” (126). “Was she to be motivated mostly by duty or desire?” (126) As Sedgwick later shows us, Madam Winthrop fulfills her duty honorably and nobly, but what Sedgwick
appears to question is whether the subordination of women itself is any "divine right"
(144). Madam Winthrop’s obedience or fulfillment of duty
never degenerated into the slavishness of fear, or the obsequiousness of servility. If authorised and approved by principle, it was prompted by feeling; and, if we may be allowed a coarse comparison, like a horse easy on the bit, she was guided by the slightest intimation from him who held the rein; indeed—to pursue our humble illustration still farther—it sometimes appeared as if the reins were dropped, and the inferior animal were left to the guidance of her own sagacity. (145)

Mary Kelley sees the implicit insult to Madam Winthrop, that “her submission was so ingrained” that she is like a trained animal (xxiv). I agree with that reading, yet I also contend that we should “multiply” the reading to sense the love that inspired the woman’s submission (the desire Davidson speaks of) and further, that the control of the reins is somewhat delusory. Her own wisdom probably did play as big a role in how she conducted her life and served her husband’s as any instructions from him. If “her wants [are] essentially the same as his and his the same as hers, where then [is] the woman’s subservient status?” (Davidson 128). Men may see women as “inferior animals,” but that simply illustrates their self-important blindness, which “modern heresy” now debates. Much later in the novel, the third person narrator laughs at this blindness. The fact is that Governor Winthrop is “in the habit of participating with his wife his most secret state-affairs” (205). In other words, he confides in her about his work, probably seeking her help as “helpmeet,” but the narrator is so obviously making fun of him, for it says “it cannot be supposed, even for a moment, that one of the superior sex should find pleasure
in telling a secret” (205). The sarcasm works to decrease the “superior sex” while it increases even the most servant-like model portrayed. In this novel, Governor Winthrop appears as fallible, particularly in his estimation of Sir Phillip Gardiner. Indeed, throughout the novel, Gardiner’s ability to pull the wool over particular characters’ eyes works as a device to indicate characters who are not as wise in the ways of the heart and soul as our two heroines, Hope and Magawisca. It also indicates a reliance on outward form as a transmitter of knowledge rather than on inner wisdom. This is a serious indictment, but it clearly connects with Sedgwick’s generation of multiple forms of womanhood and forms of faith. The forms are not what must be judged or controlled. It is the heart and the central tenet of a selflessness that is not a complete sacrifice of self that is what counts for Sedgwick. And because Madam Winthrop is “prompted by feeling” to play the obedient wife and Hope is of a “feeling make” (160), there is a link made between them that makes it impossible for us to completely dismiss Madam Winthrop as one choice or pattern of womanhood.

A PATTERN IN POSSIBILITY

If Madam Winthrop was an accepted pattern, then Magawisca is a mere possibility. Paramount in getting her readers to accept Magawisca as a character they can admire, is the requirement that they believe in her possibility. At the time of its publication, the novel Hope Leslie won acclaim for Magawisca as “a glorious creature” (North American Review) but the Western Monthly Review felt that no such noble character could be found “in an Indian wigwam” (Kelley x). Yet Sedgwick begins immediately to attack such presumptions, to have her readers set them aside.
Immediately following her title is a poem that tells us “. . . the Indian fires went out, and the Indian sun has set!” (1). Before we begin the novel, we are reminded of the Indians’ loss, as well as the notion that they are no longer a threat. The removal of any threat allows some impartiality. In her “Preface,” she predicts that the “traits of their [Indians’] character will be viewed by an impartial observer, in a light very different from that in which they were regarded by our ancestors” (6, emphasis added). To leave no doubt of her point of view, she further states:

The writer is aware that it may be thought that the character of Magawisca has no prototype among the aborigines of this country. Without citing Pocohontas, or any other individual, as authority, it may be sufficient to remark, that in such delineations, we are confined not to the actual, but to the possible. (6)

Of course, Sedgwick does cite Pocohontas, but in truth, she is fascinated by the possible—not just what is possible for the character of an Indian maiden but what is possible for any woman and what is possible for any woman who listens to her inner voice.

We first meet Magawisca immediately after the telling of her mother’s death and her mother’s words about faith. Having been taken captive, Monoca makes sure of her children’s basic safety among the Puritans and then sinks towards death. The Puritans try to convert her in these last moments, but her response—given to Mr. Fletcher by letter—insists that “all the children of the Great Spirit were equal objects of His favour; and that He had not deemed the book he had withheld, needful to them” (22). Magawisca is an inheritor of the belief that what is in the Bible is not necessary for her faith. But first we
get other elements of the character of this young Indian captive. She is tall, strong, fairly
good with English, and averse to both English dress and English religion. She tries to do
her duty as a servant in Mr. Fletcher’s household, but she has “rare gifts of mind,” a
voice deep and sweet, and in type is compared to “Judith,” “Esther,” and “Ruth” by Mrs.
Fletcher and family (32-33). To be a Judith, is to be married to the disinherited son Esau.
To be Esther is to marry outside her race and save her race through that alliance. And to
be Ruth is to marry again outside of her race and to be saved because of her kinship to
Jews. After the death of her husband, Ruth cleaves unto her mother-in-law Naomi and
joins the Jewish race, becoming the gentile woman in the line of Jesus. The very fact that
the member of the Puritan Fletcher family can see Magawisca as a type furthers her
possibility by creating an allowable space for her. That the types also address racial
differences and lost inheritances echoes deeply in the presentation of Magawisca. It is
Everell Fletcher, the son, who sees her as a Ruth, in the story of assimilation.

As a familiar type who nonetheless remains Other (who remains unassimilated),
one of Magawisca’s tasks as a character is to give the Indian’s point of view of the great
destruction and displacement that is occurring. She speaks for her people, and in order
for Sedgwick’s audience to “hear” or read this expanded version of history, they have to
find Magawisca likable and possible. Aligning her with women of the Bible is an
important step. Sedgwick also begins Chapter IV with the epigraph: “It would have
been happy if they had converted some before they had killed any” (41), a quote from
John Robinson’s letter to William Bradford expressing unhappiness about Miles
Standish’s “military expedition against the Massachusetts and the murder of the tribe’s
leaders” (357). This expresses to the reader the desire to have brought salvation to
Indians, converting them to Christianity, rather than exterminating them. The quote could make a moral, particularly Christian, reader wish for a different outcome than that which had already come about. Magawisca also serves to make Christian readers consider their religion. Speaking of her brother Samoset’s beheading she says, “You English tell us, Everell, that the book of your law is better than that written on our hearts, for ye say it teaches mercy, compassion, forgiveness—if ye had such a law and believed it, would ye thus have treated a captive boy?” The narrator enters at that moment to preach that the “most serious obstacle to the progress of the christian religion” is “the contrariety between its divine principles and the conduct of its professors” (51). Perhaps because of this gap or contrariety, Everell is able to hear a version of history not “in the language of the enemies and conquerors of the Pequods” but in the words of a Pequod, and for him, “it was putting the chisel into the hands of truth, and giving it to whom it belonged” (53).

Sedgwick repeats the noun “contrariety” throughout the novel to call into question appearance and form. These two things, appearance and form have complex relationships. Contrariety is the dilemma of faith versus works. For Sedgwick, faith is the most important; that is, a pure heart is what truly matters. Of course, if an outward act or behavior contradicts the heart, it is not divine. But form devoid of heart is the worse crime of faith. Truth is, of course, a difficult thing when expressing loyalties, and that is why we see Magawisca caught between loyalty to her father and loyalty to the Fletcher family, whom she has grown to love. When her father arrives with the understandable if deplorable desire for vengeance for the destruction of his family, Magawisca is unable to divert a similar tragedy for the Fletchers. Mrs. Fletcher, her
daughters, her baby, are all slaughtered, and her son Everell is taken to become a sacrifice to avenge the death of Mononotto’s son Samoset.

Having failed to turn Mononotto’s purpose, Magawisca never stops trying to save Everell. We read the scene of Everell, done with his sincere prayers, lowering his head upon a rock to be beheaded. Mononotto raises his weapon, and begins the downstroke with all power, unable to stop when Magawisca jumps forward, placing her arm between and shouting, “‘Forbear!’” (93). Magawisca’s arm is cut off, and Everell escapes. Her act wasn’t simply an impulse, however. To get to the place and become a shield, she had to elude a guard holding her captive, had to climb to the area up the rocky side so as not to be noticed and stopped. Impulse can mean drive, yet usually when applied to women it often means acting without thought. By placing Magawisca in a guarded/blocked space, it becomes clear that she must think in order to be able to act. She has to escape first before she can help Everell escape. Sedgwick claims that what drove her was the “power of love” (94). Love and honor are the two drives in Magawisca’s life, and her dilemma is that her love for a white man, Everell, conflicts with her love for her people, particularly her father. Her nobility, evinced in saving Everell and honoring Nelema’s request that she bring about a reunion between Faith Leslie (now assimilated and married to Oneco) and her sister Hope, creates a pattern of worth. Her spiritual inclination takes that worth further: “‘Hope Leslie, there is no solitude to me; the Great Spirit, and his ministers, are everywhere present and visible to the eye of the soul that loves him; nature is but his interpreter; her forms are but bodies for his spirit’” (332). Hope’s thoughts, given through third person narration, appropriately document the Christian desire to turn Magawisca from the “voice of
nature” to the “brighter light of Christian revelation” (332). However, the narrator reminds us two pages later that Magawisca is “one of the noblest of the works of God—a bright witness to the beauty, the independence, and the immortality of virtue” (334). This assessment aligns Magawisca’s beliefs with Sedgwick’s impulse: the impulse to identify forms as just “bodies for [God’s] spirit,” again implying that the outer is not as important as the inner.

Magawisca doesn’t get her man; her body is maimed in the act of achieving her desire to save Everell. Yet, she remains for the loving reader “one of the noblest works” in the book and, therefore, a pattern of possibilities. She is the possible woman of great physical courage; the possible woman with complex desires that remain irreconcilable; the possible woman of sacrifice who remains strong, noble, and alive after the sacrifice has been accomplished. She is a woman of a faithful heart, even if that faith is neither Puritan nor even Christian.

EPONYMOUS PATTERN

Hope Leslie is name of the book, and the character is worthy of that central framing. Catherine Sedgwick creates in Hope a delightful heroine who manages to escape the confines of house and home just as she escapes (to some degree) the prison house of Puritan form. She brings hope to women who need more space within to act their roles of womanhood, of selfhood, of faith. “[O]ne of the truly attractive women in the whole range of portraits” of Puritan settlers, Hope Leslie is “a thoroughly virtuous woman.” By this label, I believe Foster intends to express that Hope is not only virtuous in her training but in her heart (87-88). In the end, it is her heart that we as readers fall in
love with and it is her heart that we judge fit to make her a central pattern for moral
to a kind of pantheism of
serious indictment here is the “cold heart,” since the heart is her minister, her director.
and audacious and in need of discipline (109). Surrounded in youth by “variant religious sentiments,” Hope Leslie
“took counsel only from her own heart” (123, 120). “Her religion was pure and disinterested—no one, therefore, should doubt its intrinsic value, though it had not been coined into a particular form, or received the current impress” (123). The third person narrator tells us as readers how we should judge Hope’s divergence from the Puritan model of maidenhood and morality. She has “faults” but she is also “a favourite,” and readers tend to agree (123).

Hope Leslie’s heart is most tested when she discovers that Esther Downing, Madam Winthrop’s niece (and the pattern it was hoped Hope would follow upon her banishment from Bethel), is in love with Everell. Not having yet sorted out her feelings toward him (sisterly or something else), she encourages the match. Once she does realize her own attachment to him, she does not alter her course. Her heart matters less than the other two’s hearts. In fact, the need of her heart is to honor the happiness of theirs. As Governor Winthrop consults Mr. Fletcher about a possible match between Esther and Everell, he acknowledges that Hope would further the match despite her own feelings because the two girls’ hearts “appear to be knit together” (153). Mr. Fletcher is inspired to say that “what is difficult duty to others, hath ever seemed impulse in her,” but crediting Hope too much bothers Governor Winthrop. He expresses the Puritan attitude toward women: “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 emphasis in original). Performances involve action and will, two qualities that the virtuous, i.e. passive, woman would not have. To Mr. Fletcher, passivity—“a property of soulless matter”—cannot really count as a virtue (153). This dissenting male voice makes passivity a soulless thing. It doesn’t greatly
matter that Fletcher is taken to task for his "partiality," for readers are prepared to feel with him, to be on his side, by everything that has come before. As Cassandra Morgeson would be called in Stoddard’s novel years later, Hope is called "lawless" by the Governor, the highest representative of patriarchal law both legal and religious. His solution, to pair her off with the older man, Sir Phillip Gardiner (the blackguard the Governor thinks—because of outward appearance—is a model Puritan), points to another contrariety of Puritan (patriarchal) beliefs about women and desire: "Whatever gratified the natural desires of the heart was questionable, and almost every thing that was difficult and painful, assumed the form of duty" (156). Already allied to Hope through the third person narrator and to the noble acts of love she has already "performed," the reader sees the tension between the heart as sole (soul) counsel and man’s law.

Hope Leslie always chooses her heart. This choice leads her far beyond the domestic sphere of "proper" womanhood. She climbs mountains, steals captives out of jail under the nose of the jailer, meets Magawisca in the graveyard at dark, escapes captivity with Indians, escapes drunken sailors, and escapes any severe punishments or denouncements by the patriarchal society whose boundaries she explodes. Her "moral courage" is not favored by Governor Winthrop (175). Even Everell misreads her at a crucial point in the novel; thinking she is interested in Gardiner and not understanding her behavior, he compares her unfavorably to Esther. Esther herself reproves Hope for her independence:

"Hope Leslie 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)

Hope knows no such thing. She must, she knows, be guided by her heart, but that
does not imply a simple choice. Once she becomes aware of her love for Everell, she
must wrestle with that desire of her heart and the conflicting one originating from the
same place, the desire “to live for the happiness of others” (213). The third person
narrator encourages the reader to remember “how difficult the ascent to the heights of
disinterestedness” is and not too easily discount Hope’s sincere battle. Her reputation is
that she likes her own way. This appears early in the novel and is repeated on the island
where she hopes to meet her sister, who she hasn’t seen in years. The freedom (to have
one’s own way) is echoed in Digby’s speech about why they had all come to the new
world, after all. The brave talk of liberty comes immediately after Hope has discovered
that Everell, now tied to Esther, really loves her. The irony of having your own way in
the complex lives of faithful, human beings is clear. Which of our “ways” do we get to
have? Which of Hope’s desires should she get?

Hope desires to have her sister return to her and the American way of life (even if
it is still technically English, it is framed as American by Sedgwick). Her sister, Faith,
has so completely put her faith in her husband and his way of life, that she echoes her
mother’s devotion to Mr. Fletcher and his Puritan beliefs. Fortunately for her, she has not
been separated from the man she loves. However, she has been separated from the
culture and faith she was born to, and this is something Hope can’t quite handle, that her
sister is more Indian than English, and happy in so being. Here we see the limit of
Hope’s heart, shaped as it is by culture and religion—by her environment. She has a
failure of imagination here in her inability to see what is of value in Faith's life; she fails
to completely honor Faith's heart, even trying to win her over by offering jewels (as
white men had done to Indians before this). Faith honors her name and her heart, and
although she appears very little in the novel, she is an interesting character to add to the
roster of female beings. She represents a woman who can shed culture and religion to
assimilate to another, something that happens repeatedly as our world grows more global
and inter-related.

Hope desires Everell. She also desires to unite Esther and Everell or at least
honor the union she has done so much to encourage. She desires to free Magawisca. As
with her sister, she cannot have her own way all the time. Even her own desires conflict,
much less the desires of others. But she is the heroine, and she has enough success in
making her desires come to be, through her own self-reliance, to make readers happy.
Through her own elaborate plot, shared with Everell, she helps free Magawisca. She
learns to let go of her sister. She does get the man, and at the same time, retains her fine
friendship with Esther. By following her heart, and being open to other beings, other
expressions of faith, Hope becomes a woman of warmth and character. She even
includes her tutor Master Cradock in the home she makes with Everell, treating him as if
he were her father. As a pattern of womanhood, Hope would have appalled real Puritans
of the seventeenth century. It is quite likely that even her youth (often used as an excuse
for her behavior by the men in the story) would not have saved her from the appellation
of witch. She performs acts, consulting her heart over doctrine and law as to whether
those acts should be performed. She moves beyond the boundaries of the domestic
sphere, climbing mountains, staying on or escaping islands, getting into and out of the
hands of blackguards, and she is happy. "I wonder that I am ever happy, and yet it is so natural to me to be happy!"” (110) Certainly, in her gaiety and happy spirit and in her warm and loving heart, she is a pattern worth emulating.

IDEALITY AND ANOMALY IN PATTERN

Most critics seem to fault Esther Downing in comparison to Hope Leslie. Edward Halsey Foster has little to say about her at all, concentrating on Hope and Magawisca—even Faith gets more attention than Esther. According to Mary Kelley, "Esther is a sympathetic figure; however, Hope and Magawisca clearly excell in any comparisons of character” (xxiii). “[C]ulturally ideal” though Esther may be, she is not on the same level as Hope, at least for many readers. However, Esther ends the novel and since she represents a very important aspect of Sedgwick herself (in terms of society and what it means to be a contributing, moral woman), we cannot dismiss her pattern or model so cavalierly. Esther sacrifices her love for Everell twice. And at the end of the novel, she returns to America after several years in England. She reestablishes a warm friendship with Hope and Everell, but never marries.

Her hand was often and eagerly sought, but she appears never to have felt a second engrossing attachment. The current of her purposes and affections set another way. She illustrated a truth, which, if more generally received by her sex, might save a vast deal of misery, that marriage is not essential to the contentment, the dignity, or the happiness of woman. Indeed, those who saw on how wide a sphere her kindness shone, how many were made better and happier by her disinterested
devotion, might have rejoiced that she did not ‘Give to a party what was meant for mankind.’ (350 emphasis in original)

Catherine Maria Sedgwick never married. This gave her the freedom to pursue her other talents, which marriage might have infringed upon or necessitated that she give up. Foster claims that “throughout Miss Sedgwick’s writings, marriage is shown to provide the best and happiest life for women” (49). Yes, Foster believes that despite her never marrying, “she never ceased to believe that, if a woman found the right man, her life would be ideally happy” (49). A great deal of that happiness seems to rest on finding the right man, and not many of these must have existed. She never chose one herself. Often in 19th-century novels, the crucial wedding ends the text. It gives a nice sense of closure and never deals with how the marriage works or doesn’t for the young heroine.

As Cathy Davidson notes, Sedgwick states in her story “Old Maids” “it is best to conclude a story with the wedding if one wants to end on a happy day, for ‘it is not probable another will succeed it’” (123). This opposes Foster’s view, and in this novel Sedgwick chooses to deliberately bring back a woman who had to leave the story (and the country) for the happy couple to be united. And this woman, Esther, is praised and the ending quote is about her magnanimity. To dismiss Esther too quickly, then, is a mistake. What most readers fault Esther on is her failure to follow her heart rather than the doctrine and patriarchal guidance of her faith. Let’s look at Esther more closely and see if there is anything “redeeming” about her as a pattern of moral womanhood.

Sedgwick spends some time impressing the reader with Esther’s beauty, yet the impression sticks less than the “religious epithets” given her (136). A “madonna” style beauty, tall and slim, set off by the plainness of her Puritan dress, she would have been “a
reigning belle in our degenerate times,” but she remains instead someone who “excelled in the practical part of her religion” (135). When she falls in love with Everell while he is with her family in England, she engages with all the obsessions such young love can create, and had Everell felt the same, doubtless she would have developed other feeling qualities. Instead, sensing that he did not return her passion, she felt that the energy she had turned toward him was energy wasted, in fact sinned: “though human affections were permitted, they were to be in manifest subservience to religious devotion” (138). Now ill, she feels even more that she forsook her faith for her carnal love and confesses her love to Everell, hoping to have some effect on his religious development in dying. It is rather mortifying, then, that she did not die but recovered to re-enact her attachment to Everell again, in as unsatisfactorily a manner as the first time. “‘Oh! Had I but known how to watch and rule my own spirit, I should have been saved these pangs of remorse and shame’” (139). We see Esther struggling with the many emotions going on inside her. We are reminded of Hope’s struggle. Knowing the heart, being clear on which desire(s) one most wants to manifest is not an easy task. We cannot fault Esther as she struggles with this. We see her eating affected, her health again tested—playing, of course, into a paradigm that passion makes a woman sick.

At a time when Hope’s need for secrecy often makes her behaviors seem unfit for a maiden, Esther’s calm and repose are set off beautifully. “Esther turned on him [Everell] a look of that meek and pleased dependence, which it is natural for woman to feel, and which men like to inspire, because—perhaps—it seems to them an instinctive tribute to their natural superiority” (209). Somehow, with her hesitating punctuations, and the interpolation of “perhaps,” Sedgwick forces a reader to pause over this passage
and call it into question. That women only have instinct instead of reasoning faculties or higher intuitions seems to be a theme of what the men in the book believe. And that dependence can be shown in form, in a look, is all that really matters. In some ways, Hope must “depend” on men to help her achieve the escapes of the two Indian women: Digby helps Nelema and Master Cradock is critical to Magawisca’s escape. However, Hope’s form or behavior doesn’t appear as dependence. Esther’s form seems to perfectly embody proper dependence, but notice that Sedgwick never allows it to become reality. Esther relies on no one so much as herself in deciding not to marry Everell or anyone else. It is her will to remain unmarried. She prefers to see it as trusting herself to Providence (272), but there are many ways or forms in which to do that.

The one time she is allowed to express herself more emotionally, heatedly, is in a scene with Hope. Since circumspection is always expected of Esther, and given, this “uncontrolled emotion was as alarming, to compare small things to great, as if an obedient planet were to start from its appointed orbit” (275). Esther expresses her anger over not knowing how Hope felt toward Everell. But what bothers her more is the matter of morality. Everell has asked her to help him effect Magawisca’s escape (this during a time when Hope has been too ill). Esther feels that she cannot do it, that her conscience—based on her Puritan beliefs—will not allow her to participate. She doesn’t care about the danger, and she realizes that she will look “in a disagreeable light before the man she truly loves,” but she does not waver from what she perceives as her religious duty (277). She is “watch[ing] and rul[ing] [her] own spirit.” Why is it that we cannot admire her as we admired Mr. Fletcher’s desertion of his true love on the very basis of his Puritan faith? Because Mr. Fletcher’s love, Alice, never condemned him, but Everell
does condemn Esther. She had tried to achieve Magawisca’s release in a way that fit with her faith; she had tried to convert her to Christianity. Everell feels that since this did not succeed, Esther should be willing to do something separate from her faith. She isn’t.

By the time Esther is prepared to renounce her assumed engagement to Everell, she has overcome all. No longer angry, no longer torn, she is serene. "She looked as a mortal can look only when the world and its temptations are trampled beneath the feet, and the eye is calmly, steadily, immovably fixed on heaven" (340). Readers may feel that Esther failed in her unwillingness to break the law to save Magawisca. But we cannot let the pattern she represents simply be dismissed. She was no man’s pawn—not even Everell could sway her from what her conscience, her heart, said she must do. She was also no pawn of her own physical desires. She had one consuming desire, to be so aligned with her God that she served Him only. She serves the world, but does not make a good wife, for she answers to no one except that which she perceives as God and God’s word. Esther fits a paradigm or pattern of woman as server, but not in any way servile.

Generally, ideals are more about surface and form, and Esther embodies the ideal form both in beauty and grace. However, Esther is an anomaly in that Sedgwick has allowed us to see into her heart, see into her struggle between love and faith. Esther is not, as so many think, purely about form. She is about the deeper loyalties of faith and disinterestedness (a power that replaces love for the individual to include all).

SURFACE PATTERN

If Esther moved beyond form to a genuine faith of her own, written deep in her heart in pain, Hope’s paternal aunt remains primarily on the surface. Dame Grafton,
Hope Leslie’s aunt, is a minor character, and while she presents a genuine model of womanhood, it is not one that Sedgwick advocates. That she tolerates it with good humor, but often at the expense of Dame Grafton, makes it clear where she stands. Dame Grafton was “a zealous adherent to the church of England” (27), whose life led her to the Puritan stronghold in the New World. She never abandons her faith, and is buried in England in a proper Anglican grave at the end of the novel. She is belittled, however, for her fascination with the surface of things. She is obsessed with fine clothing, and rather dislikes the severity of Puritan habits, and she, like Rosa and Jennet, cannot see through Sir Phillip Gardiner’s façade. This lack of vision and insight is balanced a bit by her deep and abiding love for her niece, Hope, a love that keeps her in the wilderness. Her generous heart, at least in Sedgwick’s modeling, is something to value, even as the forms of her life and faith may not be.

EXPLODING PATTERNS

Even the two women who as types are the least valued by Sedgwick’s narrator, the servant Jennet and the Roman Catholic woman, Roslin or Rosa (depending on whether she was in her male disguise or not), provide the reader with patterns of mixed value. Jennet is, in one sense, a proper Puritan, one who has concentrated on others’ outward appearances, however, rather than inner examination of her self.

Jennet was one of those persons, abounding in every class of life, whose virtues are most conspicuous in ‘damning sins they are not inclined to.’

Jennet first found favor with Mrs. Fletcher from her religious exterior . . .

To do Jennet justice, she had many temporal virtues; and though her
religion was of the ritual order, and therefore, particularly disagreeable to her spiritual Mistress, yet her household faculties were invaluable . . . (141)

Temporal virtues are not what Puritans actually sought, but they do represent what was often actually achieved. Jennet is always looking for evil, witches, etc., and is totally unable to appreciate difference of any kind. She does not approve of Hope Leslie's behavior, but being a servant to that household, tolerates it. She can more adamantly criticize the behaviors of the Indians. She is responsible for getting the old Indian healer, Nelema, convicted and sentenced to death because she reports the "heathenish" methods Nelema used to save the tutor's life after he was bitten by a poisonous snake. Nelema chanted and called upon her Indian spirits to save Master Craddock when nothing the Pilgrims could do would help, but rather than celebrating the life saved, Jennet reports Nelema to the Puritan powers-that-be. She cares nothing for the spirit of the law, only the letter.

Later in the novel, Jennet reports to Sir Phillip Gardiner, another kind of snake, the plan she eavesdropped on—how Everell and Hope plan to help Magawisca escape from jail. Not being able to read beyond appearance, Jennet thinks she has done something noble (and enjoys the vengeance of it, too), not realizing that Gardiner is neither a Protestant nor a man of character. If Gardiner's plans had worked, Hope Leslie would have been kidnapped and (unplanned by Gardiner) would have died with the rest of the crew in the explosion. Sedgwick seems to get great delight in having Jennet kidnapped mistakenly instead of Hope, and blowing Jennet up. The Winthrop household is in an uproar thinking that Hope has been killed, only to rejoice at her arrival. But
Jennet, "the only actual sufferer, was the only one neither missed nor inquired for" (338). In annihilating this character, without regrets or grief offered by her household, Sedgwick clearly marked this model of Puritan form without heart or spirit as a despicable one. It is neither an appropriate model for woman, despite her housekeeping skills, nor is it an appropriate model for faith.

The other woman destroyed in the explosion is of Roman Catholic faith. It might seem that the faith itself is the reason for her destruction, but Rosa has already been destroyed before her death. Having been seduced by Gardiner, and having so attached to her object of desire that she has lost all moral sense, she has sacrificed self (and to some degree, soul) in a way that surpasses any flaw of "type" of faith. Nonetheless, Sedgwick, through Hope, shows her a compassion that is not shown to Jennet. "Her youth, her wrongs and sufferings, combined with the pleadings of Hope Leslie, obtained for her the rites of a separate and solemn burial. Tears, of humility and pity, were shed over her grave; a fit tribute, from virtuous and tender woman, to a fallen, unhappy sister" (348). I do not claim that Sedgwick does not disparage the "popish" faith, but for every evil attributed to it, she balances a positive. The Catholic sailor Antonio saves Hope Leslie because he believes she is a saint, and even in her fallen state, Rosa's tremendous love for Sir Gardiner, marks her as having followed her heart, something Sedgwick uses as a defense for Hope Leslie, the heroine of her novel. Rosa was too young and unwise to understand what Sir Gardiner was, but the failure of youth is not as grievous as the same failure in the adults in Boston who are also taken in by him.

One fascinating aspect of appearance, since this novel constantly opposes the appearance of proper behavior with the higher truth of following the heart, is that Rosa
multiplies what it means to have a surface or appearance that men may judge and that, incorrectly. She first appears in the novel as “an odd fish to harbour with any of our right godly ones” (127). Introduced to Everell by Gardiner as “sort of dependant—a page of mine,” Roslin (Rosa) may be dressed as a man but her apparel is “embroidered,” has “a deep-pointed rich lace ruff,” and a head “covered with a little fantastic Spanish hat, decorated with feather” (127). Gardiner blames the excessive dress upon the corruption of having lived on the Continent, and such an explanation is easily accepted by Puritans, who see that corruption as being of the pope. Gardiner, who so carefully dresses the role of Puritan, is never able to get Roslin to “retrench” her way of dress. She may masquerade as man, but she will effect the most feminine of masculine dress. This cross-dressing episode is interesting for its destabilizing effect on the definition of the feminine/masculine dyad. Compared to most puritan feminine dress, Roslin’s attire fits the descriptions of feminine design, yet in this novel no one doubts that she is a he, a page, a young male dependant. It is perhaps that beggar’s position that allows her/him to maintain his feminine-masculine charade until she decides to reveal her self to Hope. Even as a relatively minor character and as an exploding pattern, Roslin/Rosa multiplies our vision.

Conclusion

Catherine Maria Sedgwick has wrought quite a fascinating novel in *Hope Leslie*. It is as valuable for this upcoming 21st century as it has been for the two before it. Her strategy of using patterns for her female characters not only explodes the narrow definitions of moral womanhood but also the restrictive, even painful definitions of faith. We rejoice with her women characters that women are not supposed to fit only one
pattern. Each of us has our preferences, but to have choices is the best thing of all. To negotiate between what are already existing categories and definitions and add to the roster of possibilities, even if the additions are also restrictive in some ways while expansive in other, and even if the additions are shaped by cultural and societal pressures, there is still a sense of “choice.” Sedgwick gave us that sense of choice, defining and creating multiple patterns of female subjects in a novel about the roles of self-reliance and faith.


2 I realize that all the categories I am faced with in this chapter are contested and cannot be discussed as being situated in some kind of ideal totality. The categories I acknowledge include at the very least “woman,” “puritan,” “faith,” “subjectivity,” and “self-reliance.” In particular, the representation of faith is in this novel understood to be largely protestant, born more out of the late 18th & early 19th century in which Sedgwick found her own comfort in Unitarianism. It is also partly the Puritan faith of the setting. But what faith actually means and what it means to be a woman of faith, I have largely left to the novel’s own definition, which is simply and complexly an issue of the “heart.”


4 The loss of Magawisca’s arm is suggested in Foster’s book to be inspired by Sedgwick’s servant Mumbet’s own experience while still a slave. She took the blow her mistress had aimed at another slave and never fully regained use of her arm (77). The fact that Mumbet, who Sedgwick’s father had defended legally, winning her freedom, was “closer to” Sedgwick than Sedgwick’s mother is telling. According to Sedgwick, “Mumbet had a clear and nice perception of justice and a stern love of it, an uncompromising honesty in word and deed, and conduct of high intelligence, that made her the unconscious moral teacher of the children she tenderly nursed” (quoted in Foster 29). The fact that a woman who Sedgwick admired for so many capabilities, especially morality, is a model for Magawisca is important. That the woman was of a different race is also important. Sedgwick tries to offer patterns of moral courage that are not limited to white women of Christian (Puritan) faith. In fact, white women have no lock upon moral behavior and may not even be good patterns just because they are white.

5 Foster sees her as “impulsively doing the right thing,” but the effort and intent required to be in the place to do the “impulsive” thing belies that attitude.


Desire As Insanity—Self Reliance As Will

Reversals as Strategy in Ellen Glasgow’s *Barren Ground*

From Catherine Maria Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie*, we jump forward a century to Ellen Glasgow’s *Barren Ground*.¹ As the publication dates span almost a century, so too do the settings differ in time and place. We have left the challenges of the early Puritans in New England and traveled south to the tobacco fields of Virginia to a land and a people struggling back to life in the aftermath of the Civil War. *Barren Ground* covers a time period roughly from the 1890s to shortly after the first World War. Framed as it is by either the memory or the experience of war, its title immediately shifts our emotional bearings. We do not begin this novel with hope but with a sense of fruitlessness. The challenge here is whether the heroine, Dorinda Oakley, can wrest anything from the impotent nature of her inheritance, her barren ground.

Beyond the Sentimental

We enter the story of *Barren Ground* and find familiarity mixed with strangeness. The land is “bare, starved, desolate,” but the girl is a spot of color in an “orange-coloured shawl” (3). The beginning echoes the opening of Wharton’s *Summer*, and there are some similarities in plot. (A young girl is seduced by a young, weak man who has come to the country due to some ties there.) But it isn’t spring yet, the time of new beginnings. It is still the end of winter—that last gasp of bleakness before green sneaks in. The cold grayness doesn’t bode well for the romance of summer. The plot, of course, also echoes all the sentimental novels of the past—the young, innocent girl betrayed by the seducing
man—well-discussed in Leslie Fiedler’s *Love and Death in the American Novel.* And while this love affair will not be framed as Charity Royall’s was, as the experience of two independent souls entering in to a “friendship” ultimately without claims upon each other, neither will it be the death of Dorinda.

For once, in Southern fiction, the betrayed woman would become the victor instead of the victim. In the end, she would triumph through that deep instinct for survival, which had ceased to be a negative quality and had strengthened into a dynamic force. She would be hardened by adversity, but hard things, as she said, are the last to decay. And she would never lose her inner felicity, that vital affirmation of life, ’I think, I feel, I am.’ (Glasgow *A Certain Measure* 160)

Glasgow was determined to twist something new and vital out of what starts as a classically sentimental plot. Her heroine would be “the victor.” However, Dorinda does not escape without being marked by the pain she experiences. Desire and its betrayal alter her forever. But the destruction is also creation.

The Insanity of Feminine Desire

In this investigation into the writing or imagining of feminine desire and its interrelationship with self-reliance, the most stunning thing about *Barren Ground* is its insistence on the insanity of feminine sexual desire, in this case particularly heterosexual desire. When Dorinda asks her mother about love, she receives an account of feminine desire as a kind of madness:
'I was so set on your father that I moped myself into a decline,' she said in a voice that was half strangled. ‘Those feelings have always gone hard in our family. There was your great-aunt Dorinda, the one you were named after. . . When she couldn’t get the man she’d set her heart on, she threw herself into the mill-race; but after they fished her out and dried her off, she sobered down and married somebody else and was sensible . . . Then there was another sister, Abigail, who went deranged about some man she hadn’t seen but a few times, and they had to put her away in a room with barred windows . . . But she got over it, too . . . It’s nature, I reckon.

Grandfather used to say that when a woman got ready to fall in love the man didn’t matter, because she could drape her feeling over a scarecrow . . . The way I’ve worked it out is that with most women, when it seems pure foolishness, it ain’t really that. It’s just the struggle to get away from things as they are.’ (80-81)

Generally the insane desire is the one ultimately unrequited, for women can “settle” later with an essentially “undesirable” man. Even Mrs. Oakley’s husband was not her first love, and in fact for all her pronouncement of moping for him, “all the romance in her life, after the death of the young missionary in the Congo, had turned toward her religion” (35). Mrs. Oakley, after her bouts with desire, found that only religion could keep her going, but for Dorinda, “[r]eligion had not satisfied” (48). An additional revelation occurs later, that Mrs. Oakley’s desire for the missionary was really as a means to an end. She herself felt she had a call to be a missionary, to go off adventuring amid
foreign, exotic lands ("India’s coral strand and Afric’s sunny fountains") (94). It was a
"wild streak in me," which she admits she uses hard work to drive out (94).

Desire, then, is rendered even more strange and deranged by her mother’s
individual wildness. Dorinda is horrified by the stories of insane desire and by the
possibility that romantic desire might just be a "struggle to get away from things as they
are." She does not want to be like her aunts, "demented victims of love" (81). It is quite
clear that in this formulation, self-reliance cannot be achieved without the negation of
sexual or "romantic" desire, for desire posits insanity, a position from which no one can
achieve even a contingent self reliance.

Later when Dorinda catches a ride with the veterinarian, she is reminded of the
instability desire brings (for women). "He had a large family of tow-headed children;
and though she had heard recently that his wife was ‘pinning away,’ nobody blamed him,
for he had been a good provider, and wives were known occasionally to pine from other
causes than husbands” (149). Finally, in the latter portions of the book, when Dorinda
has returned to the land, she sees and hears of Geneva Ellgood Greylock’s mental
sickness, until Geneva drowns herself. "For months, they say, she had gone about
telling everybody that Jason had murdered her baby; but, of course, it was just a
delusion”” (297). Delusion or not, actually getting what you desire (Geneva’s getting
Jason) in the heterosexual construct is portrayed as destructive of feminine creativity and
stability. Mrs. Oakley suffers mental episodes. Nathan’s first wife dies of cancer. Only
Dr. Faraday’s wife seems to thrive in her alliance with her husband.

We can see that Dorinda, envisioned though she was by Glasgow as “universal,”
is nonetheless situated by the boundaries that define her as female, southern, white, etc.
And in this text desire exists for both men and women. Yet in this novel, it is feminine
desire that descends into madness. Male desire may be impotent, but not insane. Men are
never made figures of madness; rather, they are emasculated. This strategy is troubling in
an investigation of female self reliance, but I will address that in a later section.

By casting feminine desire as madness, it makes Dorinda all that much more a
victor when she overcomes desire. She does not transcend desire as perhaps Esther in
*Hope Leslie* does; she does not discover her own capacities for friendship (as defined by
Emerson or Wharton) or recognize those of others as Charity in *Summer* does. She does
not embrace desire as Cassandra in *The Morsesons* does. She wills it away. But first,
she falls as all “insane/women” do—in love. “To-day the miracle had occurred . . . She
had found romance,” but immediately “it was shot through with a burning sensation
which was less pleasure than pain” (11). It isn’t just that desire is insane; it’s also that it
brings pain simultaneously with the pleasure. In fact, Catherine Rainwater believes that
the animal images or “specular semiotics” that accompany Dorinda’s awareness of love
characterizes the experience as “negative” (206-207):

> By some accident, for which nothing in her past experience had prepared

> her, all the laws of her being, thought, will, memory, habit, were

> suspended. In their place a force which was stronger than all these things

> together, a force with which she had never reckoned before, dominated her

> being. The powers of life had seized her as an eagle seizes its prey. (24)

In Rainwater’s interpretation, this “sudden rupture in the flow of experience alters a
character’s feelings of stability and belonging. Abruptly, such characters become aware
of irreversible separation and difference from the world and the self” (207-208). Further,
she maintains that these interruptions “disintegrate” constructions of self, world, and relationship to “Other” (208). This use of the animal trope, being seized, making love the predator, overturns sentimental expectations and establishes the expectation of pain.

Immediately before finding out that Jason Greylock has had to honor his previous engagement and marry Geneva Ellgood, Dorinda (through the device of the third person omniscient narrator) expounds on her happiness: “for three months she had been perfectly happy” (105). However, if we examine the pages of her courtship, we see constant references to pain. “Why did love, when it came, take away all your ability to enjoy it?” (25) Glasgow herself found that human relationships were almost too painful to bear, and she grew to fear the pain. “The things I feared were not in the sky, but in nature and in the touch of humanity” (WW 53). She sees her search for a philosophy or religion (as Mrs. Oakley had found it) as a search for a mechanism that will allow her to continue in “a world I had found hostile and even malign” (BG 89). Dorinda is endowed by Glasgow “with a stubborn aptitude for facing facts, for looking at life fearlessly” (144). And before Dorinda leaves Pedlar’s Mill, she decides that

[all her trouble, she felt, had come to her from trying to make life over into something it was not. Dreams, that was the danger. Like her mother she had tried to find a door in the wall, an escape from the tyranny of things as they are; and like her mother, she had floundered among visions.]

(144)

The answer then is to abandon dreams (at least dreams tied to human relationships), to abandon desire, for Dorinda shares Glasgow’s terrible sense of pain connected to virtually any and all close relationships.
Although insanity is reserved for the heterosexual union of desire, it isn’t only in male-female romances that pain lives. In regard to her mother, Dorinda “had sometimes felt that the greatest cross in her life was her mother’s morbid unselfishness,” finding her mother’s very gifts hard to bear (36). And when her father is felled by a stroke, “[n]ot his death, but his life seemed to her more than she could bear” (206). From this we begin to get the sense that long before Jason Greylock betrays her trust, Dorinda has difficulty handling emotion. Anything that holds intensity in it, holds pain. Interestingly, the more positive emotion of love seems to be far more painful for Dorinda than her later bouts with hate. Hate can be used, can be a tool to help her focus on her final desire—making something of the land.

In this novel, the desire worth pursuing is the desire to make the barren ground bloom again, to take something that has been numbed and deadened as Dorinda’s own heart has been and be the one who reinvigorates it. In a strategy that combines self-reliance and desire, Glasgow chooses to leave behind all human relationships. According to Frazee, “[s]eparation [from the male] restores [woman] to herself: woman triumphs if she is left alone” (181). Dorinda can successfully create her self as the “picture of dignified self-reliance” only as the woman in charge of the land. “She knew the place was more to her than soil to be cultivated; that it was the birthplace and burial ground of hopes, desires, and disappointments. The old feeling that the land thought and felt, that it possessed a secret personal life of its own, brushed her mood . . .” (211).
Reversals/Destabilizations of Femininity and Masculinity

Glasgow, therefore, (re)writes female desire by eliminating close human relationships, thereby freeing feminine self-reliance from the obstacle of love and from the subservience to the object of desire, (perceived) masculine power. For this strategy to work, Glasgow seemed to feel that she also had to re-write masculinity. In her memoir, Glasgow makes it clear that her father was an incredibly authoritative power who preferred the “belligerent passages from the Old Testament” of “slaughters” and “blood sacrifice.” “He never read of love or of mercy” (WW 85). Will Brantley notes that although Glasgow evades the fact of her father’s long-term relationship with a mulatto mistress, she clearly places her mother’s nervous illnesses at his door (105). Other tales of his hardness are related rather deliciously (in her memoirs) of how he gets rid of her mother’s dog, sells a horse for horse meat, etc. In a way, it is also clear that she holds him at least partially responsible for her favorite brother’s suicide, having “objected to his riding on the Sabbath,” so that Frank “gave up his only recreation” (WW 85). The portrait she creates of her father is one of a hard and powerful man, someone capable of causing death by his very hardness, or at the least, great pain. Her other familial models of masculinity are her brother Frank, who committed suicide (and remained quiet for years about his obvious depression) and Arthur, who left home at sixteen (WW 64). Arthur becomes a worldly success who funds trips for her to Europe years later, but he remains largely absent from her memoir.

She had before her the exemplar of patriarchy, her father, and a successful professional, her brother Arthur. However, it is evident that she prefers the sensitivity of her brother, Frank, to traditional masculine power or masculine sexuality (Frank never
married). Did she realize as she set out to write the story of a southern female as victor that she created rather “different” men for Dorinda to win out over? Did she realize that in giving up the feeling part of human relationships, she creates a hardness in Dorinda that seems an echo of the masculine father she so resented? Frazee sees a “bias against manhood” that hurts Dorinda’s success: “The more mediocre the male partners, the less convincing becomes the superiority of women to dominate or defeat them” (184-185).

But it is also true that her strategy becomes one that destabilizes traditional definitions of male and female, that mixes elements of the masculine and the feminine in each gender, even to the point of privileging the traditional qualities in the opposite gender, the masculine in the female, the feminine in the male.

There is a section in *Barren Ground*, appropriately away from Pedlar’s Mill, where men of power and ability continue to exist—in New York. Dorinda, betrayed by Jason Greylock’s marriage to Geneva and by her pregnancy, finds her way to New York, and before finding work, faints, is hit by a vehicle, and loses the baby. Getting out of the hospital, she found that “[s]he felt nothing; she expected nothing; she desired nothing; and this insensibility, which was worse than pain, had attacked her body as well as her heart and mind” (175). “I’ve finished with love, and until I find something else to fill my life, I shall be only an empty shell . . .” (176). Empty shell she may be, but apparently an attractive shell. Two pages later two years have passed. She now works efficiently in Doctor Faraday’s office, attracting his young assistant, Dr. Burch. She has no “will to love,” however, and feels that she is “finished with all that sort of thing,” especially since it makes her “sick all over” (181, 183). The young doctor takes Dorinda to a concert, and in the magic of music, she found her deadened self coming alive again
in the most painful way. "It made me savage, just the way moonlight used to when I was growing up" (186). But the music serves to waken her emotions again, for "[p]assion stirred again in her heart; but it was passion transfigured, recoiling from the personal to the impersonal object" (188).

The two doctors have saved her life, for they have saved her body and in awakening her feelings, they have saved her soul. The men themselves, of course, remain strong and sexless as did Jason when we saw him in his role of doctor. They are catalysts for her new focus, helping her learn about dairy farming, increasing her knowledge, but when Dr. Burch proposes, she admits, "I don't like anybody to touch me" (194). "[T]he thought of Jason had come to her... and though she no longer loved him, though she hated him, ... his influence still affected her life... like a secret enemy who could... strike when she was defenseless" (194).

Men are a resource for Dorinda as she begins the new stage of her life, fastening her ardor upon the "impersonal object." Dr. Burch helps her inform herself about dairy farming, taking her to lectures, suggesting books, etc. Dr. Faraday provides capital, and Nathan Pedlar is her contact for field hands, ideas, insights; she "find[s] him useful, anyway" (213). "Utility... was what she required of men at this turning-point in her career" (223).

While back in New York, men may retain some traditional masculine qualities, the men back in Pedlar's Mill are representations of "difference" in the categorization of the masculine. Dr. Jason Greylock, the grand seducer of the novel, is self-confessedly weak in character: "He [my father] broke my spirit, I suppose, when I was little" (71). In fact, he has his own trouble with desire: ""[W]henever I reach out for anything I
particularly want, I have a jumping of the nerves, just as if I expected a snake to strike” (51). And Aunt Mehitable says it all when she says that “he’s got everything you want in a man except the one quality that counts with the land.” “You speak as if Jason lacked character,” Dorinda replies (104). Long before Dorinda accepts this as truth, the reader has already judged Jason. Only once in the novel does he appear powerful, and that is when we see him working as a doctor. Interestingly, he loses his sexuality in his power and ability (much as “conservative” novels often render women sexless when they exhibit personal power). “In the sick-room he appeared to have shed his youth as a snake shed its skin. He might have been any age. He was brisk, firm, efficient, and as sexless as a machine” (65). These are Dorinda’s thoughts, and it creates a very mixed idea about what is sexually appealing about men for the woman Dorinda. She has essentially been attracted to his handsomeness more than anything else, valuing him for a surface quality rather than any awareness of his inner self. Glasgow is (re)writing masculinity by using reversals. Reversing the qualities often placed upon woman as representative of desirable femininity and making them instead representative of desirable masculinity is (consciously or subconsciously—and since she had read so much of Freud and Jung, she had to have some self-awareness) part of her strategy to render women self-reliant. At one level it raises the specter of the masculine woman—having to don masculine traits (and disavow feminine ones) in order to achieve independence. At a more interesting level, our reactions to Dorinda’s attitudes toward the men in her life (patronizing) put in play an instability in regard to received ideas of both masculinity and femininity. By placing upon her male characters the burdens of definition and limitation so often placed upon women, she makes the reader uncomfortable, makes what once seemed “natural”
when applied to women strangely “unnatural” when given to men—and vice versa. It is, if read in that light, an incredible indictment of either/or dynamics. As readers, we are apt to like some qualities of the feminine in the masculine, but not too many. We are apt to like some qualities of the masculine, but not too many. Such displacement disrupts our reading expectations, creating contradictions which we may choose to ignore, write off as a failure of characterization, or engage as a critique of those same expectations. The apparent “diminution” of her male characters awakens both our scorn and sympathy in ways perhaps different than the same diminution of a female character would.

Jason marries Geneva Ellgood not because he finally chooses to honor his previous engagement (as Lucius Harney implies it is his choice), but because Geneva’s father and brothers march him off to a shotgun wedding. Having married, Jason is fool enough to hope that Dorinda will still see him. He does not reckon her character as well as she now reckons his. Jason had escaped Pedlar’s Mill to become a doctor (not his choice but his father’s) only to return and get caught again in his father’s alcoholic web. From the first moment he appears in the novel he is on a downslide based largely on his own weakness of character, controlled by his own patriarch—reversing the trend mentioned in the first chapter of the novel that sons leave and “daughters withered dutifully beside” their fathers (5). He becomes a particularly southern daughter figure, sacrificed to his father’s will.

Dorinda’s own father faces diminution in this novel as well. “He was a good man and a tireless labourer,” but also “ineffectual” (7). Glasgow’s narrator describes him as “slow-witted,” a “dumb plodding creature,” “passive[ly]” yoked to the land, “inarticulate” with a look of the “wilderness” because of his uncut hair and beard (32).
So he awakens “tenderness” in Dorinda in much the same way that animals awakened that sentiment in Glasgow. By taking the humanness out and reducing the father to a kind, inarticulate work horse (and he is identified with his two good horses time and again), she contains his physical power, creating a correlation between his obvious physical masculinity and an ineffectual existence. His most daring action was in marrying above his class (“poor white”), achieving middle class status that nonetheless is unavailing in bringing him any success. He toils endlessly until a stroke fells him, and he leaves behind barren ground. This portrayal of masculinity calls into question the value of physical power over some other not-quite-defined power perhaps of intelligence combined with education. It is not, as Frazee sees it, simply that a “woman with brains can do better farming than ignorant and lazy men” (177). Mr. Oakley has the knowledge of experience and could never be called lazy; however, the knowledge of experience obviously fails the land, as perhaps it fails women.

Dorinda’s two brothers matter little overall. Josiah has “a good character but a mean disposition” and his ability to work hard is destroyed by his choice in a second wife—choosing poorly. The fact that to choose poorly in marriage essentially erases him from the plot echoes the constant refrain of many sentimental novels so concerned with teaching a woman to choose wisely in marriage. According to Cathy Davidson, this was an acknowledgement that women’s real lives were so enmeshed in the legal rights and status of their husbands (having none of their own) that their moment of control and choice was the moment of acceptance of an engagement to marry. To choose poorly would be to condemn oneself for all time (122). In Glasgow’s novel, it is the men who make the poorest choices and therefore suffer. Josiah never figures largely after he is tied
to Elvira. His power is rendered neuter. And once married to Geneva, Jason begins to
drink like his father, losing his medical practice; and Geneva (having won the man of her
dreams) becomes insane, running wildly about the countryside. Again we see the
counterpoints of the insane position of feminine desire and the powerless position of the
masculine.

Rufus, Dorinda’s younger brother, sacrifices his mother’s integrity in order to
escape inevitable prison for killing a man. She gives her word that he was with her at the
time of the man’s death, and known as an honorable woman, her word is accepted. It
matters little that her spirit is lost, too. His character—in its weakness and lack of
honor—is contrasted with his mother’s nobility. This is not entirely a reversal, for the
noble woman’s sacrifice has lived in many a sentimental novel, but it is once again a
creation of a man who requires rescuing, a traditional position for the feminine now made
masculine. It is the powerful (in her honor) woman who rescues him. And it calls into
question the value of that sacrifice. To read it as valuable, the reader must admire that
the mother makes this choice of her free will. It is her choice; and it is because of all her
years of honorable behavior that she has the power to save her son’s physical self. The
limit of her sacrifice is, of course, that she has no power to save his soul (or her own
spirit).

The closest Dorinda comes to feeling the love her mother felt for Rufus comes in
her affection for Nathan Pedlar’s son, John Abner. Of course, he is acceptable as much
for his clubfoot as for any inner quality he might possess. A sense of continuity is made
between the tenderness Dorinda felt for her inarticulate creature father and the emotion
kindled by her stepson. But again, that her strongest emotional sentiment toward humans
is the tenderness she allows herself to show to a young, lame boy is a demonstration of her own lameness, her own crippling and also a questioning of the demands of a patriarchal society that create—in their constructions and restrictions of femininity and masculinity—positions so crippling.

(Mis)Reading Nathan

As a total contrast to virtually all the other men in the novel, Nathan Pedlar is the equivalent of Lawyer Royall in Summer. He is the friend to Dorinda (and a friend to others) from the beginning of the novel. Upon her return to Pedlar’s Mill, after his own widowhood, he supports her efforts to remake her barren ground into a dairy farm. He is the wise man, the kind man, the “dependable” man, but he cannot make Dorinda “see” him. She thinks of him as an “absurd” “clown” who “had made as little impression upon her as a pine tree by the roadside” (15). He isn’t handsome as Jason is, but he is a success by worldly standards, owning a store, a mill, and a farm. He is an innovative farmer, experimenting with alfalfa and crop rotation (16). Yet over and over again, the narrative seeks to make fun of him, to render him unimportant and undervalued. The coldness directed at him culminates in the marriage he finally makes with Dorinda. He marries her, altering only little his worker relationship with her (he gets to bring his children to live on her farm); it is a sexless marriage because that is what Dorinda wants. This, of course, overturns the patriarchal right of a husband to legally demand sex of his wife. In this version, the woman has complete control over her own body. The delight the feminist reader might have in that aspect is countered by Dorinda’s attitude.

After five years of marriage, Nathan was scarcely more than a superior hired man on the farm... he had no part, he had never had any
part, in her life. It was his misfortune, perhaps, that by demanding
nothing, he existed as an individual through generosity alone. . . Yet he
was an easy man, she reflected, to live with, and for a woman who was
growing arrogant with prosperity, an easy man was essential. (300)

It is not until after nine years of marriage that, while still finding him unattractive,
she comes to appreciate his "moral integrity" and "magnanimity" (329). As classically as
a novel in which the moral woman lies dying, reforming her reprobate lover or husband
too late, Nathan does not live to discover Dorinda's burgeoning respect. His hero's death
(rescuing people in a train wreck which he does not survive), however, cannot work the
wonders of feminine deathbeds. Dorinda "remains unshaken by her loss," only
wondering if "[e]motionally [she] would always prove unequal to the demands of life"
(345). The most admirable human being in the entire novel, although made a hero,
remains—partly because of the lateness and the sensational quality of his heroism (the
erection of a monument in town in his honor)—a man emasculated, undesired and
unappreciated by the woman he subjects himself to through marriage. Nathan's story is
the tale of the sacrifice of hard work and muteness generally credited to woman in
dedication to man, yet another reversal. As readers we have to negotiate the narrative's
tendency to negate Nathan as a man at the same time that it also makes him the best and
truest lover (human) in the book. Perhaps, in destroying the ground traditionally
occupied by the feminine and masculine, Glasgow intends us to "see" how assumptions
we accept easily when applied to women are disturbing when applied to men. Near the
end, Dorinda sees Nathan made into a legend, at which time it becomes
impossible that she should ever think of Nathan as unromantically as she thought of him while he was alive. Death had not only ennobled, it had superbly exalted him. In this chant of praise there was no reminder of his insignificance. Could it be that she alone had failed to recognize the beauty of his character beneath his inappropriate surface? (353)

It is acceptably human to mistakenly judge people we do not know as well as we think, but it is amazing that Glasgow gives to her heroine, her “victor” the deepest weakness she condemns in her own father—an inability to understand or appreciate the man she knew and worked with almost all her adult life and to whom she was married for over nine years. Of her father, Glasgow writes, “Though he admired her [his wife], he never in his life, not for so much as a single minute, understood her. Even her beauty, since he was without a sense of beauty, eluded him” (WW 15). In his failure, he sounds like Dorinda.

Dorinda is not, of course, a fictionalized version of Glasgow’s father. But she shares attributes which complicate her portrait as the character most to be admired. “Where the human being had failed her, the heroic legend had satisfied” (365). Whose failure is it? Nathan’s or hers? It may be society’s failure in that the constructions which allow us to “read” male or female characters as admirable are so gendered that we cannot truly “see” them until they are “displaced” upon the opposite gender, exposing our blindness. Then, when we see the “unnaturalness” of our gendering qualities, we are comforted by the return to the traditional. Why does the town’s erection of a monument to Nathan’s heroism seem to diminish him even more? It gives him the “phallus” when the power it represents no longer matters to him, underscoring in fact his marriage’s
impotency. The energy and drive to make a monument to him feel almost farcical. Is the fact that they are celebrating a very masculine act—sacrificing self to physically rescue people in a train wreck—a way to re-capture, patriarchally-speaking, the manifestation of masculinity within a male character? And does the re-establishment of masculine power and force kindle in Dorinda respect if not desire for her now dead husband? The monument operates in some way as the substitute phallus (dildo) that Nathan was never allowed to “get up” during his marriage with Dorinda, and it brings some satisfaction—to her. These shifts question our ability to truly negotiate definitions of femininity and masculinity. The episode of the monument carries a tone of farce or at least, exaggeration, and I find it a valuable strategy for complicating the slippages between the masculine and the feminine during the entire section in which Dorinda and Nathan are married.

Barren Ground, Fecund Ground

Dorinda returns to Pedlar’s Mill because her father had a stroke, and also because she is ready to manifest her dreams, to resurrect her land—and in so doing, resurrect her “essential self” (141). Through intelligence and unceasing hard work Dorinda not only makes her inherited lands fruitful, she is able after many years to buy Five Oaks, the land belonging to Jason Greylock, and make that land bear fruit as well. Her dairy is successful, and she charges high prices for her butter. She comes to contribute to her community as well, particularly helping out during the 1918 flu epidemic that felled so many. She pays off her debts and becomes one of the wealthiest land-owners in the area, with acreage surpassing Bob Ellgood’s.
In fact, she is courted by Ellgood, and as usual feels no desire, but her surface aesthetics are again apparent. Both in their fifties, Dorinda’s hard work has kept her figure trim. Bob is now “coarsened and beefy” with ripples of flesh under his chin (366). It is his appearance as much as anything else which finally decides her against his suit. She has no need of him financially, and no desire for him physically. It isn’t his character, however, that she rejects but his looks.

Dorinda, widowed and wealthy, crosses her land in great pride. She has weathered the struggle to first make the land produce; the deaths of her father, her mother, her husband; the flu epidemic and labor shortages caused by war and changing economies; the courtship of the equivalent male (in wealth and status). She remains untouched, until she is told of Jason, about to die in utmost poverty, about to go to the almshouse. “The colour had ebbed from Dorinda’s cheeks and she looked as if she had withered” (373). Jason still has the power to touch her.

Her own horror of the almshouse debates the justice of his ending up there. “Though the horror of his fate did not lessen the wrong he had done, by some curious alchemy of imagination it reduced the sum of human passions to insignificance” (375), so of course after denying any responsibility for him, she has him brought to her home and provides a nurse for him. Her stepson, feeling it an unnecessary kindness, says, “you are a big woman, Dorinda, even if you’re trying at times. There’s an extra dimension in you somewhere” (384). Indeed, she has mixed feelings about accepting him, but seeing him later at the poorhouse, she realizes it is not the Jason she remembers, for “time had revenged her” (393). “How futile, how unnecessary, it had all been,—her love, her suffering, her bitterness” (394).
Jason's return (although he remains largely inarticulate and it isn't even clear he knows who she is) provides Dorinda a review of her past.

[While she listened a piercing light flashed into her mind, as if a lantern had been turned without warning on a dark road. In this light, all the hidden cells of her memory were illumined. Things she had forgotten; things she had only dimly perceived when they were present; swift impulses; unacknowledged desires; flitting impressions like the shadow of a bird on still water... As this circle of light widened, she saw Jason as she had first seen him more than thirty years ago, on that morning in winter... “People have to be kind to each other sometimes.”] (399)

But Jason himself cannot heal her. He dies, and she mourns, but not for Jason. “What she mourned was not the love that she had had and lost, but the love that she had never had” (404). For a time, she is inundated by the emotions she had so long kept “caged” behind her eyes (372). “Time was nothing. Reality was nothing. Success, achievement, victory over fate, all these things were nothing beside that imperishable illusion [a vision of young Jason]. Love was the only thing that made life desirable, and love was irrevocably lost to her” (407). But these feelings are part of mourning only. And they echo strangely with stories told then as now of successful men who have so dedicated their lives to the company that their families and wives are disconnected from them.

Only in facing the loss of those relationships do these men feel, suddenly, that all their work has been for nothing. By making Dorinda experience this, Glasgow places her in the position—both positive and negative elements included—of classically successful men. Further, by subtly reusing the animal image which established the relationship
between love and pain early in the book—the predator bird, Glasgow allows the
mourning for loss of love to be haunted by the pain, now in shadow form: "flitting
impressions like the shadow of a bird on still water" (399).

After the storms of the heart have passed over her, Dorinda remembers the land
"waiting to take her back to its heart. Endurance. Fortitude. . . . This was the permanent
self. . . . She would find happiness again. Not the happiness for which she had once
longed, but the serenity of mind which is above the conflict of frustrated desires" (408).

The Fruit of (Not-So) Barren Ground

Dorinda Oakley is a fascinating woman. Framed and situated by all the things
that define her, she slips in and around them as best she can. She escapes the limits of
her sex as defined by her society (and the possibility of insanity or instability) by not
marrying for desire, by achieving physical success through hard work and intelligence,
becoming the wealthiest landowner in her area. At the same time, she cuts herself off
from motherhood, from heterosexual desire. She escapes her region by moving to New
York, where she gains mental strength and accumulates knowledge she can apply upon
her return—a knowledge more of the mind than of experience, for she mistrusts
experience. It is ignoring "experience" of how things are or have been that allows her to
overcome the barrenness of the inherited ground, infusing it with new life. It is also by
ignoring the experience of received ideas of masculinity and femininity that allows her to
alter her own enactment of femininity. Her attachment to the land substitutes in some
way for the deaths or even nonexistence of relationships throughout her life. She is
altered by her experience of sexual desire and its betrayal, but she discovers new strengths and abilities that might not have surfaced otherwise.

Although Glasgow herself says that Dorinda "exists wherever a human being has learned to live without joy," there is a sense that Dorinda does garner joy from her work and her life on the land (CM 154). Her effect on her black workers is to dissolve their cold complaints "in the contagious warmth of her personality" (326). So, although Glasgow overwhelmingly portrays Dorinda as frozen inside, holding her heart away from the pain of feeling, there are small glimpses of at least a partial thawing, a partial joy.

If, "[f]rom the beginning to the end, she breathed in my [Glasgow's] mind the air of probability" (163 CM), she does the same for the reader. Dorinda is neither an idealized agent of feminine desire or self reliance (no matter how contingent) nor a victim of some monolithic or hegemonic power structure often labeled "patriarchal." Foucault has already called into question our use of binarisms which seem to create static splits between power and powerlessness. Lora Romero, in her work, Home Fronts, voices beautifully my own sense of the relationships within and around power. She sees that "a progressive stance in one arena does not entail a progressive view in all other arenas," that "the entire range of relationships of power" are not equally or consistently affected by particular "work[s] performed by culture" (5).  

Conclusion

So, in trying to answer my earlier posed question, how successful is Glasgow's strategy for writing feminine desire and self reliance, the answer remains—as the imagined Dorinda does—ambiguous. The writing of feminine heterosexual desire as insane provides an ironic humor over the behavior of women in the novel, and echoes as
laughter provoked by all the sentimental novels Glasgow seems to see herself responding to. It justifies Dorinda’s survival instinct which requires that she set aside intense human emotion. But it also places the feminine heart, the emotional seat, in a position that prevents its own strengths from being celebrated, unless completely divorced from sexual desire. The writing of men (and their desire) as ineffectual and impotent confuses our reading of Dorinda’s successes in the realm of the masculine. It, of course, also asks us to question the perceived power of any male seducer such as those celebrated in particularly early sentimental fiction. Creating a character as noble as Nathan Pedlar, allowing other characters—including his own (second) wife—to continually diminish him, and finally making of him a hero deserving of a monument in town, Glasgow completely destabilizes our ability to read definite and clear values regarding either self-reliance or desire or gender. Glasgow herself says that she admires Dorinda more than most of her heroines for her survival instinct. But by illustrating so completely her own failure of heart (which echoes Mr. Glasgow’s), the text forces us to see her as less a model for feminine desire or independence than as a model for the flawed, and “probable” human Glasgow is most concerned in seeing survive. Dorinda discovers within herself ways to overcome all of the experiences (and corresponding emotions) that might destroy her. She rejects experience as the ultimate teacher, in fact, for the text of experience will just replay the same old, tired stories. Glasgow has Dorinda rewrite knowledge in the very soil, using new techniques of farming; Dorinda is a written text of difference, different qualities of the feminine and masculine consciousnesses displaced, shifted and shifting. The shifts are not always pleasant for the reader, but that strategy of
destroying comfort also destroys ignorance, forcing us to question "experience" as

Dorinda does. She lives on terms not ideal, but terms real enough to allow her survival.

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3 See Cathy N. Davidson's *Revolution and the Word* for a discussion on the sentimental novel which completely disrupts any contemptuous dismissal of such works. She sees how the constructed historical space occupied by antebellum novels shapes narratives that are at one and the same time conservative and rebellious. Her work informs my own readings.

4 That is not to say that she does develop friendship or companionship, especially with Fluvanna. However, her ability to engage others at the level of her own self-sacrifice is limited.


8 In Wharton’s novel, *Summer*, we are aware of how far the affair has gone. We know the minute the body becomes involved with the Fourth of July kiss, and we know of the weeks that pass before the next level is reached. The reader gets to see the old shack they use as their sexual sanctuary. In *Barren Ground*, however, Glasgow totally elides Dorinda’s sexuality. She is pregnant, so we have to assume that buried in the romantic language of her attachment to Jason before her betrayal, and expressed in the contrasts of severe pain and total numbness after the betrayal, her sexuality existed. We never see it expressed directly.


Expansion And Contraction:

Complementaries As Strategy In Creating

A Black Feminine Consciousness

This chapter begins with a dream. I had begun rereading Their Eyes Were
Watching God and barely gotten into it before bedtime. In the dream state, I was joined
by a room filled with voices, a front porch space, layers of sound, storytellers vying for
the telling detail, the creative turn, the master moment—control over the spoken text. My
consciousness was filled with a population of front porchers, whose voices hummed and
built along with the rumble of my heater’s nightly expression. The power over telling is
unfixed, forever mobile so to “write” a definitive critical work on this piece is as
mistaken a project as to believe that feminine desire and/or self reliance can be defined or
written in a definitive manner. All I can create is my own version of a front porch tale.
The voices were an opening of the text, vying for another version, like opening a
celebrity closet several rooms in size and experimenting with all the possible
combinations. Zora Neale Hurston might like that, for she enjoyed clothing her
characters in variation—unfixed. Zora Neale, as critics often call her, assuming an
intimacy brought on by her “collaborative” storytelling, destabilizes the monolithic
creation of a written text, fixed by time. Storytelling ghosts rise up to people my own
dream time with their voices, complaints, laughters, words, the wooden-floored porch
creaking as they shift ghostly weight to make a point or speak on top of someone else. It
is a raucous dream, a joy, a creation true to Hurston. Hurston already wants to negotiate
her way out of categories and definitions before I have even finished re-reading the text.
It's because the "reading" is what this text, this lightened and re-imagined sermon
preached on high about women by women for women is about. Reading—like
storytelling—like listening in order to re-tell a story "in the mouf of my friend" is an act
of creation. Zora Neale has reached my soul in a dream peopled in voice more than form,
in sound rather than shape. I am hers, as Sherley Anne Williams expressed it.¹

Nonetheless, as Zora negotiates her way in my dreams, I have to address the
concerns which shape this project on feminine desire and self-reliance or self-
construction. I have envisioned discussing Hurston's strategy as one using the
complementaries of expansion and contraction. These are not to be seen as polarities or
opposing forces, one labeled "positive," the other "negative." Instead these two forces
work together, are complements. When we breathe, our lungs expand and contract. In
breathing practices, the contraction is important for ridding the lungs of old, stale air as
well as preparing the space, the lungs, to suck in fresh, oxygen-rich air. In a way,
contraction (and in advanced practices, the holding of no air in a gap between contraction
and expansion) is absolutely necessary for the increasingly complete expansion. In hatha
yoga practices, holding a posture or asana is never a static process. As the practitioner
breathes, he or she can expand the stretch during either the in breath or the out breath,
using the complementary moment to slightly contract or pull back (relax) the stretch. For
each contraction, the practitioner earns an increase in expansion of the stretch. In studies
of knowledge acquisition, graphs never plot a steady state of progression. Rather there is
an increase in knowledge, a forgetting, a faster re-learning, etc. And Derrida taught us all
that in apparent "contradictions" (complements) and in gaps we find spaces which alter,
destabilize, or negotiate meaning. All this is to say that I desire in this chapter to couch
the terms “expansion” and “contraction” as complements without necessarily giving to
them negative or positive positions. Although in the end, I value expansion over
contraction, my point is that expansion is not achieved in opposition or negation of
contraction, but rather in conjunction of a flow between the two states. It is also my
contention that if we examine Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in
light of these terms as strategies for the development of a black feminine consciousness
and its relationship with desire, we will be able to better open ourselves to and understand
the rich and contradictory criticism already written about this novel.

When I realized that I saw Hurston’s work as one of expansion and contraction, I
was excited to see the relation of that vision with volume two of *Moving Beyond
beyond the boundaries” we are expanding definitions or readings. In Davies’ case, she
and the women involved in her project were all concerned with expanding the voices of
black women writers to include self-defined black women in many nations and in many
languages. Although most commonly used to refer to the Jewish nation being sent out
upon the earth, exiled from their own “nation,” the use of the term “diasporas” in this
context acknowledges that through the capture and importation of African men and
women into slavery around the globe during the western world’s greatest geographical
expansion, and in migrations due to civil wars or other forces, black women have been
dispersed into nations the world round. To therefore examine a black women’s literature
and only look at those writing or publishing in the United States and Britain is to
contract the definition of the terms “black/women/writers.” Davies chooses to not only
include many unknown, or locally known, or regionally known “black/women/writers” as
well as “well-known” (or virtually canonized) ones, she also critiques the processes of “canonicity,” of making only certain writers “available” and only certain parts of their oeuvre, etc. I admire her project of expanding the voices that speak as “black/women/writers.” Of course, that is not my project. In fact, I have chosen only one “black/woman/writer” in my selection of five women writers writing and publishing in the United States over a period of roughly 100 years. However the choice of Zora Neale Hurston as that one allows me to move into territory as complex as if I had chosen several different “black/women/writers.”

In Zora Neale Hurston, as Davies states in her introduction, we have a “model” of a “classic case of exclusion and recanonization,” a writer who was “outside the boundaries” of a black literature as defined by Richard Wright (7-8), but who was “reinvented and reimagined, reinterpreted” into growing “black/women’s/African/American literatures” (8). Hurston, whose contemporaries “found her aggravatingly contradictory and amazingly complex” (Jordan 105), remains a writer who even among critics today is both loved and disdained. Critics have tried to create paradigms in which Hurston fits or doesn’t, and the problem is that she never fits any paradigm exactly, nor is she to be completely excluded. She almost always exceeds definitions or boundaries or else is seen to fail to fully embody some required component. For this reason, she is an especially important author in this exploration of strategies used by women/writers to “write” or imagine feminine desire and the construction of a female self or consciousness.

My purpose in this chapter, then, is to open up readings of Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God. I will address some of the critics in the Hurston debate, trying to contextualize their insights within the framework I see of expansion and contraction. It is
my hope that this framework will allow us to more completely celebrate the complexities
that go into an individual writer’s particular piece of writing, at a specific historical
moment, in a distinctive cultural/racial milieu, not to mention the complications of gender
and sexuality.

The essay included in Black Women’s Diasporas is “Zora Neale Hurston: A
Subversive Reading” by bell hooks. Her focus is that in always concentrating on the
construction of a female self in relation to marriage and/or romantic love as we look at
Janie’s relationships with men, we “overlook Hurston’s concern with the construction of
‘female imagination’ and the formation of a critical space where woman’s creativity can
be nurtured and sustained” (245). We limit, then, what Hurston has to “tell” us. In a
world that suppresses women’s ability to speak and be heard, hooks claims that Hurston
deliberately uses a mix of traditional devices as strategies: telling lies which “mask
truth” and mixing them in multiple plots that create “structural ambiguity” (245). For
hooks, Hurston’s use of a third person narrator, a device which a number of critics feel
compromises or destroys Janie’s self-development, is a powerful choice to make clear the
novel is not a “sociology of folk life” but “a carefully constructed imaginative work” that
uses folk tales, dialect and other materials controlled by a third-person narrator, a work
not limited to the point of view of one character (247). Janie’s “voice” is “never
jeopardize[d]” by the use of a third-person narrator. Rather, Hurston achieves the move
from oral storytelling to the field of writing, making use of the oral traditions so
important to folk life, but also able to critique the exclusion of women from the oral
practice by “black male domination” as a way of limiting the black female imagination
(247). In hooks’ work, which compares Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own with
Hurston’s novel, she expresses the success she sees in Hurston’s creation of a space, “a
safe private place . . . where the self can really breathe . . . a wide transformative space”
(254). hooks’ image uses both of my complements for we think of “safe” and “private”
as hidden places with protective barriers, yet the “breath[ing]” expands the space into a
“wide transformative” amplitude. We might, then, look at Their Eyes Were Watching
God and how it illuminates feminine desire in terms not just of sexuality and human
relations, but in regard to issues of the feminine imagination.

Opening the Reading

Because of the challenge of incorporating many critical voices within my
contribution of framing, I choose to begin “reading” the novel, letting the different voices
speak when they desire. First we must look at the opening, because of what openings
mean in the context of expansion and contraction. Openings are the doorways through
which we step to embark upon yet another adventure, in this case the adventure of
“reading” a “story.” Those same doorways are enclosures of safety we may step into, as
a return. The opening of Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God immediately moves
us into the complements of expansion and contraction. “Ships at a distance have every
man’s wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever
on the horizon . . .” (9). 6 Hurston immediately moves the reader out to the “distance,”
then “in with the tide,” then out to the “horizon.” Then we see “a woman and she had
come back” (9), and this is our introduction to Janie, a woman who had come back. To
come back presupposes a having left, so Hurston undoes the sense of a first movement
(and of first cause, the traditional start of creation). Readers enter as the tide returns, and
the telling of the story is a continuous surge of going out and coming back
The novel begins with the woman “who had come back from burying the dead” (9). And because she enters town at “sundown” all the people who sit about on their front porches see her. Again, we are reminded that she has come back, a sense of returning, pulling back, and that she returns at sunset, a time traditionally of endings (as are burials). But these images of contraction and returning immediate create an increase in storytelling (or at least commentary) as the people on the porches are inspired to move from “tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences” to “[become] lords of sounds” and “[sit] in judgment” (9-10). With the image of a woman re-entering town, we get the stories about her, stories that question her behavior in terms of decorum regarding age, class, sexuality, and most of all that question why she doesn’t “‘stop and say a few words with us’” (12). The power of telling is situated first, before we get any of the details of the story. Even more, the quality of the listeners, those wanting to get the scoop, are foregrounded and called into immediate question.

‘Ah see Mouth-Almighty is still sittin’ in de same place. And Ah reckon they got me up in they mouth now.’ [Janie]

‘An envious heart makes a treacherous ear. They done “heard” ’bout you just what they hope done happened.’ [Pheoby] (16)

Pearlie M. Peters believes that the “assertive voice” is Hurston’s focus in her writing, and that Janie is one of several female characters who “are all effective assertive women who use the power of the word in Southern folk communities for their self-survival” (299). Although female assertiveness and voice I would agree is one of Hurston’s concerns, it is interesting that Peters does not see how complex are the tapestry of storytelling and the thread-voices Hurston weaves. Peters doesn’t look at how those voices are heard.
Carla Kaplan sees more complexity. She notes that Janie does not "acquire a voice" in the process of the novel, "but had one, in fact, all along" (118 emphasis in original). For Kaplan, Hurston is concerned with the received aspects of storytelling, how it will be received by a myriad of listeners, how it may be misread. In fact, Kaplan feels that for Hurston, narrative's "salutary psychosocial outcome [in terms of being "constitutive of social or personal identity"] is always contingent and circumscribed, never guaranteed" (118). She believes that Hurston's writing "inscribes the novel's various historical and implied readers into its forms, highlighting disjunctions between implied and ideal readers" (119). In an article that discusses the value of the novel within a high school curriculum ("college-prep, junior English classes"), Julie Roemer illustrates the difficulties of "reading," for as she admits, "[s]ome of my students rebelled. They simply refused to read or write beyond the 'happily-ever-after' ending of Janie and Tea Cake's love affair and ignored the last crucial sequences of the novel" (72). Admittedly, we expect less of young, immature readers, but are we in the arena of critics much better? It becomes clear that often we "read" what we "hope done happened." We read out of our own desires, our own needs, and so how we read, what we interpret is never completely pure or free of our own desires. bell hooks addresses this in her astute essay by acknowledging that in forming her own sense of identity as a writer, she first discovered women writers, Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf, never thinking of them as "white women" (244) until her experience altered. Then she discovered Zora Neale Hurston, and Zora "became the representative mentor for me" (245). In doing a "subversive reading" of the novel, hooks can express her need as she critiques the work itself. Similarly, Alice Walker says, "I became aware of my need of Zora Neale
Hurston’s work some time before I knew her work existed” (83). Jennifer Jordan’s concern is that in approaching Hurston as a “role model,” feminist readers may fall into a trap of “feminist fantasies,” and fail to see that Hurston’s novel is not “an appropriate fictional representation of the concerns and attitudes of modern black feminism” (107). In fact, Jordan is concerned that feminists so need a “role model” that they will accept one who does not fit their own feminist definitions of “the sexual, cultural, and political needs of black women” (107), needs such as redefining roles beyond “sexism or racism” and “achiev[ing] a feminine bonding,” and finally, moving into a “racial communalism” (107-108). However, we must, as readers “opening” up what it means to read, question a reading that is compelled only by an agenda of “individual transformation, feminine bonding, and racial communalism” (108). In doing just that—reading according to an agenda, Jordan claims that the novel “ultimately belittles the suffering of the majority of black women whose working-class existences are dominated by hard labor and financial instability” (108). My response is that the novel nowhere belittles black women’s experience; it does, however, fail to represent many aspects of their experience. The question then arises, is a failure to represent an experience necessarily a belittling of that experience? Framed differently, this may well be worth an exploration. Acknowledging that Hurston’s novel has gaps of representation of black female experience may lessen the power of what her novel does offer; it may also expand what we as readers need to explore.

Those Who Have Ears: Telling/Listening & Desire

At the end of the front porch scene, Pheoby Watson questions “if it’s anything to tell or not,” but if there is a story to be told, she will go to her “best friend” with “a plate
of mulatto rice” and hear it (12-14). So we get a sense of the growing desire between the two “best friends” to tell and to listen: “Pheoby eager to feel and do through Janie, but hating to show her zest for fear it might be thought mere curiosity. Janie full of that oldest human longing—self revelation” (18). There are complex layers in the issues of representation, self-representation or racial representation being framed by or shaped by political movements going on at the historical moment of Hurston’s engagement with these issues, and I acknowledge that whatever understanding I have garnered from the already written texts on those issues influence my reading(s), but I will leave those texts to speak for themselves. I will focus again on how contraction and expansion may frame some of these discussions.

As Janie begins to share her narrative with Pheoby, “[s]he thought awhile and decided that her conscious life had commenced at Nanny’s gate” (23). The scene then described is one of sexual awakening; as Carla Kaplan puts it, the novel “is the story of a young woman in search of an orgasm” (115). Kaplan avers that the “sexiest passages in American literature” are, in the end, about narrative desire—finally, a desire for the perfect listener (reader), and that this is a very difficult desire to satisfy (115). But we begin at Nanny’s gate; a gate indicates a boundary marking in and out. But Janie destroys the sense of boundary by “letting Johnny Taylor kiss her over the gatepost” (23). In many ways, this drawing of a boundary and then dissolving its ability to hold anything apart, to separate in any definitive way is a technique that addresses the politics of representation Kaplan discusses in her essay and within which Jordan situates her critical stance. Definitions have limited power; representations of some politically correct black
feminine self is such a limiting vision that Hurston dissolves the framework so carefully worked out by many of the black writers of her period:

The boldness with which Hurston represents female desire was transgressive in a context in which black publication guidelines warned that nothing liable to add fuel to racist stereotypes of wanton licentiousness and primitivism would be printed: 'nothing that casts the least reflection on contemporary moral or sexual standards will be allowed. Keep away from the erotic! Contributions must be clean and wholesome.' (Kaplan 122)\textsuperscript{14}

It isn't that Hurston is unaware of white racist definitions or unaware of an emerging black writer class (and middle class) that is trying to subvert those definitions with new ones. Neither is she naïve. She simply rejects the need to keep within artificial borders. It goes back to the desire for a reader who can understand. There are strong echoes of Jesus' narrative responses in Hurston's.\textsuperscript{15} Pheoby is concerned that,

'It's hard for me to understand what you mean, de way you tell it.

And then again Ah'm hard of understandin' at times.'

'Naw, 'tain't nothin' lak you might think. So 'tain't no use in me telling you somethin' unless Ah give you de understandin' to go 'long wid it.'" (19)

While in Proverbs 4:7, after a discussion of divine qualities to strive for, knowledge and wisdom, it is emphasized that "with all thy getting get understanding" (emphasis in the original),\textsuperscript{16} it is clear that understanding comes through a complicated relationship of
consciousness between speaker and listener, between writer and reader. Asked by his disciples why he uses parables, Jesus replies:

Therefore speak I to them in parables; because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed: lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear.

But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth . . .

(Matthew 13: 13-16, 23 all emphasis in original)

It is also worth noting that in the Book of Revelations there are at least ten renditions of “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith” (Revelations 2:7, 17, 29, etc).

Listeners, then, who have substituted their physical senses for their spiritual senses can hear and not understand, and it is not the narrator’s task (Jesus’ purpose) to speak to those without understanding. His task is to reach all who could still use their spiritual eyes, ears, hearts. Janie will give Pheoby the “understandin’” to go with her storytelling; in other words, she will not need to speak in parables that Pheoby cannot understand. She will withhold nothing from this particular listener because Pheoby listens with her heart: “’Pheoby, we been kissin’-friends for twenty years, so Ah depend on you for a good
thought [good ground]. And Ah’m talking to you from dat standpoint”’ (19). Also, the passage from Matthew gives us another way of understanding Hurston’s title. We will look at it later when it appears in the narrative, but in considering it as part of the opening, we see that those who cannot hear, those readers not worthy to hear, who cannot “see” and “hear” and “understand” with their hearts, have also closed their eyes to God. So, it appears that her title addresses an audience of ideal listeners, 17 those who have understanding because they have not closed off the spiritual senses, “their eyes were watching God.”

By situating Janie’s telling of the story in the teacher/student model and using language that echoes the Jesus/apostle model, Hurston places the writer or teller of stories in the role of savior, a kind of god. She plays that power model against other folk tale devices that situate God in vulnerable, human positions, undermining omnipotence. This device plays with the idea of “creator,” displacing the standard masculine/white imagination implied in the creation of literature with a goddess-like black/ feminine imagination. However, the various signifiers throughout the text that draw upon classical Christian ideologies of God and those from African-American folk and trickster tales work to destabilize received ideas of the relationships among the power of telling, the power of listening and the complexities of making meaning. It isn’t, therefore, simply a replacing of traditional dominant imaginative discourse with its opposite—a marginalized imaginative discourse brought into the center. The mix of references and devices expand or multiply the processes of making meaning and question the writer’s/reader’s abilities to make meaning in any concrete, universal way. By expanding the processes and foregrounding the fact that writers do not make meaning in isolation but in collaboration
with an audience of readers, Hurston does two things. She fragments the much-admired “universal” writing (ocean) of dominant discourse into multiple voices of marginalized experience/representation (infinite drops of water), and at the same time, she enlarges the universal ocean of expression.

From the beginning of Janie’s narration (which will be subsumed by the third person narrator later), we are made aware of her longing for self-revelation, and we are given the context of the most basic of revelations—the biblical ones: that the revealing of the inner self is a narration fraught with the probability of being misheard, mis-seen, misread, misunderstood. So at the commencement of an expanding story we are brought in contact with the constriction of misreadings. We are held up in order to hold off our immediate, perhaps limiting, interpretations of Janie’s story. This is why the constructing of a self through narrative is always contingent and shifting, to be undermined or created in a moment by a reader’s blind eye or penetrating sense.

Because one of my desires is to contextualize other critics, I will (to a large extent) follow the points in Hurston’s narrative they chose to focus on. One of the deliciously sensuous images repeated throughout the text is that of trees. In the beginning, Janie identifies with “a blossoming pear tree,” whose “mystery . . . from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom . . . stirred her tremendously” (23). So obviously in the tradition of female sexual awakenings (similar if less lyrical passages exist in Wharton’s Summer and Glasgow’s Barren Ground), this passage promises that “[s]he had been summoned to behold a revelation” (24). Kaplan feels that Janie’s assumption that this revelation is about marriage is her first “misreading” of a text presented to her (116). It is a misreading of a sentient text read through her senses. Instead, Kaplan feels
that the genuine revelation is about “self revelation” which is “fulfill[ed]” in “telling her story to Pheoby” (116). Just as the springtime blossoming of the pear tree is an opening and expanding, mirroring the opening and flowering of aroused feminine genitals, self-revelation is also an opening, an arousal, an expansion. Telling is erotic, fulfilling, and moves through the complements of expansion and contraction as the story dilates and then closes.

Tree images also serve to distort, as Nanny’s use of the image does: “‘You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways. You in particular’” (31). Again, the tree image is joined with telling:

‘Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high, but they wasn’t no pulpit for me... So whilst Ah was tendin’ you of nights Ah said Ah’d save de text for you. Ah been waitin’ a long time, Janie, but nothin’ Ah been through ain’t too much if you just take a stand on high ground lak Ah dreamed.’ (31-32)

I would argue that Janie does come to “take a stand on high ground” and speak her own “text” sermon. She survives the hurricane, returning to the high ground of home after burying Tea Cake and tells Pheoby her story. Before that she has to “take a stand” in court to “testify” that she shot Tea Cake only in self-defense. Once Janie returns and tells her story, her sermon, her text to Pheoby, Pheoby feels she’s been elevated “ten feet higher from jus’ listenin’” (284), which is the transformation all preachers of sermons might desire. However, Janie does not come to her sermon because of Nanny’s vision, and it isn’t Nanny’s text at all. In fact, if Janie had continued to play out Nanny’s position that she remain materially safe, attached to Logan Killick’s forty acres and a
mule, she would never have had a story worth telling. According to Kaplan, however, the idea that Nanny’s point of view “is mere materialism” is to dismiss it as “a feminist alternative to the male radicalism of African American cultural politics of the 1920s” (125). For Kaplan, Janie’s “repudiation” of “her grandmother’s life and values” is part of her “view of voice” as essentially private (126). In having Janie so often hold her tongue, it appears that Hurston is adopting a “racial strategy” she described in Mules and Men, wherein “self-censorship” is a “form of self-protection” against a “hostile audience” (126). In the end, Kaplan feels that “Janie rejects her grandmother (and, implicitly, the cultural politics of many of her contemporaries) because Nanny gives up on female desire” (127).

40 Acres and a Mule

Logan Killicks is metonymically tied to his material assets, and so he is imaged, as his place is, as “like a stump in the middle of the woods” (39). From a dead stump no blossoms will burst forth and pollinate, and Janie, desirous of bees and pollination, complains to Nanny whose branch of narrative closes upon the image of her on her knees praying (looking like a stump), barely able to rise and collapse upon her bed (43). Nanny’s death, a contraction of the narrative, is followed by expansion again in “a bloom time” during which Janie realizes that she knows “the words of the trees and the wind” (43-44). As the trees go to seed, Janie hopes the seeds “fall on soft ground” (44). This desire comes to her because it is the desire of the seeds themselves, voiced so that Janie can hear. We are reminded that seeds that fall on soft ground are, in the New Testament, words that communicate with an ideal listener, and Hurston has turned Janie into a listener who can hear the words of trees and seeds.
In the midst of her discontent with her stump of a husband, Janie meets Joe Starks while she is sitting under a “fine oak tree” (47). Although the image echoes with Joe, it isn’t directly applied to him. In fact, “Janie pulled back a long time because he did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for the far horizon” (50). So, when Logan threatens to “take holt uh dat ax and come in dere and kill” her, essentially to cut down her own blossoming tree, Janie leaves with Joe (53). Janie chooses the extending magnitude of the “far horizon” over the dwindling image of chopped kindling. This, of course, also expands the play of narrative desire because we as readers move into a new setting with new characters, new voices, and an increased emphasis on telling.

Mrs. Mayor

In Eatonville, even the name of the town encourages its inhabitants to chew the fat, to talk, and to conceive of narrative as an attractant like pollen to bees. After Joe and Janie have gotten directions from Hicks and Coker, the two men discuss Hicks’ desire for a wife “just like [Janie]” (58). He claims he could get a wife “[w]id mah talk, man,” because “[d]ey loves to hear me talk” (58-59). When Coker remains unimpressed, Hicks says, “‘You ain’t never seen me when Ah’m out pleasurin’ and givin’ pleasure” (59). However, when Hicks later tries to get to Janie behind Joe’s back, there is “a long dead pause” (61). Janie fails to respond to his desiring speechifying and remains “close-mouthed” — an image that echoes with a closed vagina, and shuts down the reproduction of talk between them (61). Janie’s desiring, perhaps opportunistic in running away with Joe, is not indiscriminate.
For someone who represents the enlarging image of the far horizon, Joe is surprisingly attached to boundaries, which he uses to contain and silence Janie. He makes her cover her hair (which is equated with both her sexuality/sensuality and her mixed race); expects her to remain either in the house or the store, restricting her relationships with other members of the town, especially the front-porch contingent; he also shuts her up. "[M]ah wife don’t know nothin’ ’bout no speech-makin’" (69). His preempting of her speech "took the bloom off of things" (70), and his desire "‘tuh be uh big voice’" at the expense of her voice leaves her with a "feeling of coldness and fear" (74).

The constriction which came upon Janie in her role as "Mrs. Mayor" is played out in the story of the mule, the entire episode of which is an explosion of storytelling. Although trying to keep quiet in order to "git along," Janie "began muttering to herself" (90, 89), and Jody (Joe) overhears her sympathy for the mule and disgust at the people baiting him. He buys the mule and retires him from work. At this point, Janie finds her voice, waxing in her expression of gratitude: "'Freein' dat mule makes uh mighty big man outa you... You have tuh have power tuh free things and dat makes you lak uh king uh something’" (91-92). Suddenly, the town sees her as a "born orator," and when the mule finally dies, she wants to participate in the "dragging-out" of the carcass (92, 93). At a moment in the text when the act of telling is augmented through "mock[ing]... eulog[ies]" and tales of "mule-angels" and the transformation of narrative voice into buzzard storytellers, Janie is shut behind a door back home, closed up. From this moment until Joe Starks' death, the narrative breathes out to us story after story: a mock debate and an "acting-out courtship and everybody is in the play" (105). Janie is reveling
in listening, but when a woman who once inspired her husbands to “preach” in order to
catch her eye comes in, Jody makes Janie wait on her, shutting her off from the joy of
listening, telling her to be a Martha rather than a Mary (Luke 10:38-42). Even as Janie’s
tongue is loosened and she begins to speak back to Jody, an expansion of her voice, her
sensual nature closes up, so that she “[isn’t] petal-open anymore with him” (111). As
“her image of Jody” is “shattered,” she sees it as “[j]ust something she had grabbed up to
drape her dreams over” (112). This echoes the passage in Barren Ground where
Dorinda’s mother speaks of feminine desire: “‘Grandfather used to say that when a
woman got ready to fall in love the man didn’t matter, because she could drape her
feeling over a scarecrow . . .’” Janie wanted to leave her stump, Logan Killicks, so she
draped her tree dreams over Jody, who stood for the “far horizon,” but a horizon that does
not include her expansion.

As Jody begins to age, he displaces his aging onto Janie by criticizing her. Janie,
fed up with it, strikes back:

‘Naw, Ah ain’t no young gal no mo’ but den Ah ain’t no old woman

neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah’m uh woman every

inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat’s uh whole lot more’n you kin say. You

big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but ‘tain’t nothin’ to it but

yo’ big voice. Humph! Talkin’ ‘bout me lookin’ old! When you pull
down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life.’ (122-123)

When Jody asks her, “‘whut’s dat you said?,’” a customer says, “‘You heard her, you
ain’t blind’” (123). The mixing of the senses echoes again with the biblical references
regarding the ideal listener and understanding. In Jody’s case, he doesn’t want to
understand the insult and once he does, the end is near. He shuts Janie out of his life, inhabits another bedroom, eats the cooking of other women, and implies that Janie has placed a curse upon him. It is only at the moment of his death that Janie attempts one last time to turn him into a listener, “you gointuh listen tuh me one time befo’ you die... you wasn’t satisfied wid me de way Ah was. Nah! Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me... Too busy listening tuh yo’ own big voice”” (133).

A Moment of Freedom

In expanding Janie’s voice, Hurston complementarily brings Jody’s voice to a close. But it is a mistake to celebrate Janie’s voice as constituting a self. In fact, Janie herself realizes the loss of Joe the man, “in the making of a voice out of a man” (134), and turns from voice to a mirror, experiencing a kind of gestalt in looking for her “girl self... in the looking glass” (134). Of course, the image in the mirror is as limiting as a voice in constituting a self; the two simply create parts of a whole never quite figured. After Jody’s funeral, Janie feels that she understands the mistake of her life so far. “She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of people,” but Nanny had sidetracked her into looking after “things” (138 emphasis in original). At the very moment that she feels an urgency to see herself in relation to others, the narrative plays up that in her one familial relationship Nanny had taken the horizon, “the biggest thing God ever made... and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter’s neck tight enough to choke her” (138). Kaplan identifies the horizon here as female desire (127). Although we will continue to see Janie play herself out in relation to Tea Cake, the narrative has already called love into question as “mis-
love” (138), so that Hurston seems to take to task the socio-psychological view of women as primarily constituted in relation to others. She questions the value of that relationship even as she writes relationship. In this moment of the text, in a gap between Janie’s relationships, having moved so solidly from Nanny to Logan to Joe, the narrative flows with a “freedom feeling” (139). It is important that this sense of freedom precede the introduction of Tea Cake, because as Hurston herself wrote, she created Tea Cake as a kind of memorial to a man she loved yet chose not to stay with because she valued freedom more.21 Here in this gap, we hear the echoes of Hurston’s choice—if we are listening—as an alternative to the story about to unfold.

Tea Cake: She “wuz so satisfied.”

As a wealthy widow, Janie is pursued by most available men, but they make a huge mistake in thinking “it was not fitting to mention desire” (143), and so they get nowhere. It remains for young Verigible (Tea Cake) Woods to woo her through play and ease: “Look how she had been able to talk with him right off!” (151) A great deal has been written about Tea Cake, who Janie describes as seeming like “the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring” (161). One thing to consider when we think of the use of tree images to represent humans is the verse from Mark 8:24, “I see men as trees, walking.” The context is that a blind man is being healed by Jesus. When asked what he sees, that is his answer, at which Jesus again lays hands upon him, “restore[s]” him so that he now sees “every man clearly.” So in relishing her sensuous vision of herself as a tree, Janie is not seeing herself clearly yet.

Tea Cake and Janie’s relationship, vibrating as it does with play and sensuality, has attracted a great deal of attention among critics, and they dance back and forth
between statements of idealized equality and complaints of male domination. S. J.

Walker maintains that theirs is "a relationship between acknowledged equals" (521), and Alice Walker feels that Hurston wrote "one of the sexiest, most 'healthily' rendered heterosexual love stories in our literature." Lupton, however, sees Tea Cake's death as the fair result of the war between the sexes, with the woman remaining triumphant at the end. Jordan reads a more matter-of-fact message, that Hurston "accepts as commonplace a certain type of physical violence between the sexes" and that attitude precludes a need to punish Tea Cake by having Janie kill him. Further, Jordan sees little indication of strength in Janie's return to Eatonville "because she cannot continue her quest for excitement without Tea Cake and has demonstrated no ability to survive alone" (113). Jordan feels that in the end, Janie settles for a life of memories rather than "taking charge of her own and others' destiny" (115). She cautions readers not to fall for "feminist fantasies" that make more of Janie than there is, and even Kaplan notes the "desire to see narrative, dialogue, and conversation not only as forms of personal and social recognition but also as means of social transformation," which then corrupts our ability to truly read the novel's end. Christine Levecq addresses the relationship between Tea Cake and Janie again in opposition to the romantic. During the time with Tea Cake, Levecq says, "the text contains many explicit and implicit indications that Janie does not achieve freedom, or an identity where a solid sense of self blends harmoniously with a sense of belonging in the outside world." Levecq finds that "Hurston does manage to present the complex issue of identity" but that the ending's withdrawal will "stop the continuous movement she needs to keep growing" (108).
The time on the muck with Tea Cake, the hurricane, Tea Cake’s rabies-induced madness and Janie’s shooting of him in self-defense, her “trial” and his funeral often appear to be condensed to Janie’s and Tea Cake’s relationship, which is clearly one of passion, jealousy, pleasure, and an emphasis on the moment rather than any sense of future or goal-setting. Perhaps this is disturbing, that the relationship, which lasts only two years compared to the twenty-something of her marriage to Starke, is about momentary pleasures: dancing at the jooks, gambling, playing guitar, and telling stories. After a moving description, however briefly, of the “hordes of workers” coming to work bean-picking season, “[p]eople ugly from ignorance and broken from being poor.” Hurston completely drops the economic necessities of other people’s stories and returns to the ongoing vacation-style of Janie and Tea Cake, “the romping and playing” (196, 199). At the same time that the two of them are pictured as being at play night and day, short chapters throw all the tests of new marriages right at them. First there’s Tea Cake’s jealousy of his beautiful bride that keeps him sneaking off the job to check on her (and play) until he can get her out to the field with him, so he can keep track of her. Janie experiences her own jealousy in an episode that brings out the role of violence established fairly evenly between them. Their own desires and insecurities are played out.

Then, in a complication that foregrounds Janie’s mixed racial heritage, the intraracial hatred of Mrs. Turner challenges the “appropriateness” of Janie’s light-skinned self being married to such a black man, creating a level of jealousy in Tea Cake that brings up all the historical fears of white/black-master/slave baggage that haunts the background of black folk even when they are acting out their existence in a setting.
largely absent of whites. Issues of class and money intertwine with the element of racial difference (209-210). It is in the midst of this triangulated relationship—Mrs. Turner, Tea Cake, and Janie—and the issues of blackness, money, class, and self-hatred that "gods who receive homage" appear (215). In the pain of hierarchy (temporarily Janie over Mrs. Turner because Janie is even lighter-skinned than Mrs. Turner), in the structure of master/slave, the narrator tells us that "all gods dispense suffering without reason," and that "[t]hrough indiscriminate suffering men know fear and fear is the most divine emotion . . . and the beginning of wisdom" (215-216). The fear set forth here is one of racism both external and internal, and the resulting hate (Tea Cake and friends tearing up Mrs. Turner's diner). With an increasing pitch of jealousy with more violence and the issue of "marking" a light-skinned woman, there seems to be a desire to see the marks of slave-beating on the body of the white, in revenge for the historical (and still possible) beating of blacks. This desire is displaced upon the body of woman, which seems to create a possible understanding of black male violence upon black female bodies as a response to oppression by whites, again a layering of racism now mixed with sexism. When the relationship between Tea Cake and Janie is most intense, the hurricane enters the story, but it is no more listened to than Janie was at the beginning of the novel.

The Flood

The fact that the Seminoles and Bahamians, people closer to other ways of knowing than through "Western rationalism," sense the storm early enough to pack up and leave and warn the blacks on the muck to do the same is telling. As Erik Curren's discussion in his article "Should Their Eyes Have Been Watching God?: Hurston's Use of Religious Experience and Gothic Horror" contends, Hurston posits black folklore as an
alternative way of knowing in opposition to rationality, but the Americanized blacks have lost that ability (their eyes were closed, if not to a Christian God, then to an alternative spiritual path). Curren seems to feel that God is equivalent to "Ole Massa" or white masters and by watching to see whether white men are leaving or not, they are watching a God, and it is not "in the bean pickers' best interest" (22). So for Curren those who are watching God are "the real zombies" who fail to embrace "a kind of folklore that sees its autonomy realistically and can avoid repeating the mistakes of white America" (24). It is a provocative and fascinating reading, and it helps us move into the storm.

The increasing emphasis on racial tensions and master/slave dialectics do occur just prior to the arrival of the hurricane. And the black workers do watch the white bossmen and take their cue from them, refusing to leave after the Seminoles and Bahamians have. But the reference to watching God comes after all of that. When it is clearly too late, "[t]hey huddled closer and stared at the door. They just didn't use another part of their bodies, and they didn't look at anything but the door. The time was past for asking the white folks what to look for through that door. Six eyes were questioning God" (235). It's a bit late, but they are beginning to use the right sense at the right time, and to rely on their own sense of knowing rather than "white folks," so that their eyes are now open to God, to seeing, to knowing. "They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God" (236). This is a moment of contraction in that the focus is so sharp, yet it is also an expansion of awareness and knowledge. The knowledge they now perceive is the mighty force of God in nature, but what has led to this eye-opening is also the knowledge that Tea Cake and Janie share right as they realize they are in true danger, that she "wuz so satisfied wid" Tea Cake. "We been tuhgether
round two years. If you kin see de light at daybreak, you don’t keer if you die at dusk.
It’s so many people never seen de light at all. Ah wuz fumblin’ round and God opened
de door”” (236). Not seeing the light, like not watching God but bosses’m instead, relates
to the failure of telling, because “talkin’ don’t amount tuh uh hill uh beans when yuh
can’t do nothin’ else. . . you got to go there tuh know there. . . Two things everybody’s
got tuh do fuh theirselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin’
fhuh theirselves”” (285). This revelation resounds with Emerson’s descriptions of self
reliance, that one can learn only from within oneself, not through another’s experience.
Talkin’ is not the same as doin’. Not the same as facing one’s death, which is what going
to God may be about for Hurston. Although couched entirely in western, Christian terms,
the essence of the hurricane revelation (I would agree to this extent with Curren) appears
most clearly looking through alternative lenses. It is in completely facing one’s death,
accepting it, and letting go of it—while still alive—that allows real living to come into
play. This has little to do with Christian faith, but rather a faith in oneself, one’s choices,
a willingness to enter an experience and remain present. Janie has done this in her
relationship with Tea Cake in a way that she never did with Killicks or Starke. The
withdrawing motions in the first two relationships prevented her satisfaction. But when
she chose to marry Tea Cake, she was “‘ready and willin’ tuh try ‘im’” (171), and at the
moment of hurricane force, she has no regrets. The resolution of Tea Cake’s episode is
of secondary importance to the realization Janie has (as reported through the third person
narrator first and then through her own voice speaking to Pheoby). Having gone to God
to know God, even if that wasn’t her intention, Janie has satisfied her hungering desire
for the far horizon. This is not any kind of orthodox religious revelation. Rather it seems to be about satisfaction, self-satisfaction, self-focus.

My reading of the title’s use in the hurricane chapter differs from Curren’s, but I find his emphasis on choosing ways of knowing based on black cultural experience to echo with Kaplan’s emphasis on the ideal listener/reader. The two add up to choosing the right path and being truly present (listening) on the path. The flood waters, of course, undo any sense of path and destabilize both of the above. Hurston gives us nothing entirely solid. She pours forth the waters, crossing all boundaries, opening up expanses, yet this expansion does not create the cleansing process attributed to water, for the flood brings to the surface all kinds of dead, dying, trashy things. Coming as it does right after increased violence in response to racism within the black community itself, the garbage that comes to the surface might almost represent the repressed issues of conflict with the community’s body left unaddressed because of the uniting resistance to white racism and violence, expanding the narrative beyond the united black front many black authors felt obliged to keep. Tea Cake, as the black “representative” male who so often has borne the brunt of white violence upon his body, dies young as so many black men do still today. And this brings further conflict to the community, as Janie is blamed for murdering him. Tea Cake, as a character, has both engendered readers’ affection and frustration (judging by critics’ responses), and I agree with Jordan that his death is less a punishment or judgment than an illustration of what life offers up. It also serves to end a “vacation romance” which had to end sometime. The relationship between Tea Cake and Janie was never intended to be a growing old together. It moved Janie out beyond Eatonville, took her to the place where the horizon paradoxically almost disappears as the water erases
landmarks, expanding in vastness. It opened her to play and to her sexuality; it opened her to the pleasures of people surrounding her with music, talk, betting, and movement. The "self-crushing love" that allowed "her soul [to crawl] out from its hiding place" is difficult to read (192). Does this mean that her sense of self was destroyed by her love for Tea Cake? And if that is the case, why would that free her soul to come out and play? Again the sense of contraction in "self-crushing" is contrasted immediately and complexly by the movement of her soul out into the open.

Closing: "She called in her soul to come and see."

This juxtaposition of complements continues in the final moments of the story. Janie has, in a sense, been airing out her old closed-up house the entire time the telling of the story takes, and after Pheoby leaves, Janie revels in its freshness even as she re-shuts and re-fastens everything before going upstairs (285). "She closed in and sat down. Combing the road-dust out of her hair" (286). Contraction and stasis are contrasted by the reference to the road, but we know she's come in from the road and is not preparing to go back out. Yet the wave motion repeats as all her memories rush in to touch the spaces and things in her bedroom with sense memories (sound and sight), but they also fly back "out of the window" to the trees. At this moment the trees seem only to be trees and no longer represent a blurred image of herself. The contrast of the dead Tea Cake with the aliveness of her memories of him is also a very common feeling after the loss of someone. Then the novel closes:

She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see. (286)
Much has been said about how closed off, how claustrophobic and static the ending appears and how that indicates Janie’s failure to achieve true self-hood and independence. Let’s simply look again at the strategy of movement. The pulled in horizon echoes with Nanny’s pinching of her horizon earlier in the text, a contraction of desire, a loss of space, yet pulling in a fish-net has always meant bringing in a catch from the deep, to bring into her life the knowledge, wisdom, experiences (yes, based on memory now) of the recent past. It creates a sense of harvest. To “drape” it over herself reminds us that once she draped her desire over men—out there in the expansive world—but now she sees herself as the focus of desire—contraction—yet it too resonates with satisfaction. She is experiencing this moment (and it is both an ending and simply a moment which contains no beginning and no end), and it is full of life. “[M]eshes,” of course, hints at the complexities, layers of experience, of contraction and expansion, of life and death, of being caught, or being connected. But if their eyes were watching God during the storm, here in peace, it is her soul which sees. She becomes both the subject and object of her existence, dissolving separation, and complicating our need as readers for a resolution of which is it—expansion or contraction? Hurston here places upon shaky ground our ideas of growth, community, individuality, subjectivity, relationship, and what it means to imagine a black feminine consciousness fully engaged with desire.

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1 The text for all references to Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God is the 1987 re-issue with a foreword by Sherley Anne Williams put out by the University of Illinois Press at the 50th anniversary of the original publication in 1937.

They do this rather than to allow the united (and contested) terms “black women writers” to become something thought of as dominantly African-American women writers published most extensively in the United States and often defined in opposition to the (also contested but often united) terms “women writers,” considered to be white women writing and publishing in the United States or other western nations.


In the essay, hooks herself refers to a work on the constraints placed on women writers. I, too, want to reference the same work. Figes, Eva. Sex and Subterfuge: Women Novelists to 1850. London: Macmillan, 1982.


Since Kaplan does an excellent job of situating Hurston’s paradoxical uses of talk “within the representational cultural politics to which it responded and in which it sought to intervene,” I will leave that to her essay. Also, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s The Signifying Monkey and much of the body of Hurston criticism in general address these issues.


My use of biblical references which I see echoed or alluded to in Hurston’s novel is not meant to imply any formal Christian beliefs on Hurston’s or Janie’s part. Erik D. In her autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road (Ed. Robert E. Hemenway. 2nd ed. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1984), Hurston discusses her own complex relationship with Christianity as she grew up under the influence of her preacher father. She was of a questioning nature and felt dissatisfied with most answers given in Baptist orthodoxy, forced to conclude that because “the great masses fear life and its consequences,” they create a God for a “feeling of security (278-9).

17 Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in The Signifying Monkey sees Pheoby as the student (ideal listener) and Janie as the "pedagogue" (184). His interpretation is also in line with Jesus in his role as teacher and apostles as student-listeners. Janie transforms Pheoby in the telling of her own story.


20 Naturally, the stump image must echo within the framework of sexuality surrounding Janie. Such an image does two thing. It emasculates Killlicks, limiting his ability to "satisfy" Janie from the start. It also seems to emasculate the heterosexual set up of desire and satisfaction.

21 Dust Tracks in the Road, page 260.


25 Jordan, p 110.

26 Kaplan p. 135


28 Curren, Erik D. "Should Their Eyes Have Been Watching God?: Hurston's Use of Religious Experience and Gothic Horror." African American Review. 29:1 (1995). I would take issue with Curren's definitions of African America as an "innocent culture" and the incredible lumping together all of "white America" as immoral and corrupt. As he argues for the pluralism of African religions and folklore as a positive, his false creation of some kind of universal and united white culture indicates either a naiveté or an unwillingness to address what he sees as an oppositional culture for all its differences. Since difference has been such an important element in black criticism and certainly as it is crucial to the gothic (Curren's interest), it seems that acknowledging difference within the "white" community would be a natural move to make.

29 I do not intend that Tea Cake occupy any determined space of representationality; rather I just want to "glance" at the idea of it.
Conclusion

Dr. N. Scott Momaday says that we tell stories in order “to appropriate an experience” and bring things that are Other to us into our sense of what it means to be human.\(^1\) In the act of reading stories, I would contend, we also appropriate experiences or possibilities of experience that may or may not have a correlation to our physical, relational world. What I have tried to trace in this project is how the telling and reading of feminine selves are not simple tasks. There is always the chance for a (mis)reading and even when “read” right (write), the construction of such selves are “always already” written (read) by external, and probably internal or internalized, forces such as history, culture, race, class, family, psycho-social constructions and experiences of the author and conditions and sites in which literature is produced.

Despite those factors, I found it valuable to look at the five female authors I have chosen, to perform close readings on particular texts from their oeuvres, and to discover strategies for creating individual feminine consciousnesses and for creating space for both the play of self-reliance issues and feminine desire. By thinking in terms of strategies, I assert that we as readers more fully engage with these elements and open the readings of each one. What did not happen was to find some kind of “ideal” expression of female representation and desire. Instead, there are many and complex moments in which self-reliance and desire get to be played out to different levels of success. To decide which elements or which moments are most successful probably rests with individual readers. I loved them all.

\(^1\) Momaday, Dr. N. Scott. Convocation Address. Los Alamos, NM. May 13, 1998.
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