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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Kristina Lee Knotts entitled "The Dissolution of the 'Emotional Center of Life': Women's Friendships in American Fiction (1873-1915)." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

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The Dissolution of the "Emotional Center of Life": Women's Friendships in American Fiction (1873-1915)

A Dissertation

Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Kristina Lee Knotts
May 2000

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In honor:

Rebecca Lee Knotts

and

Virginia Dare Sullender (1909-1995)

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Abstract

"The Dissolution of the 'Emotional Center of Life': Women's Friendship in American Fiction (1873-1915)" examines the ways in which women's texts reflect the many social changes occurring after the American Civil War. During this time, traditional notions of womanhood were crumbling, giving way to new representations of women, as seen in fiction and other cultural documents. In particular, this study pays special attention to the move in women's fiction from "homosociality" in women's friendships to less hospitable relationships. The study begins with a discussion of Louisa May Alcott's *Work* and Mary Wilkins Freeman's *A New England Nun*, fiction which depicts the problems experienced by women when they leave the private sphere of home and family and enter the public world of work and competition. Both writers portray friendships between women as both a haven of bonding as well as a mire of contention. Next discussed are Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*; both works deconstruct the ways in which women's material conditions powerfully shape their relationships with other women. A brief Afterword reflects on the dissertation's main ideas. Gathering all of these texts

together to discuss their portrayals of women's friendships shows how a study of female friendship, itself a construct in the American nineteenth century, reveals the way in which notions of gender and, particularly, femininity, were gradually changing in late nineteenth-century America.

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Chapter One:

The Dissolution of the "Emotional Center of Life":

Women's Friendships after the Civil War

> We live close together and we live far apart.
> We all go through the same things--it's all just
> a different kind of the same thing.
> Glaspell, *Trifles*, 1911

In *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860*, Jane Tompkins argues that literature should be studied because it offers "powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment" (xi). Tompkins's influential work, published in 1985, sought to open the door of the literary canon for sentimental fiction, and her ideas offer a powerful incentive for considering how literature offers a glimpse of the social relations of its time. In particular, Tompkins makes a strong case for investigating previously unheralded works, texts about women, and fiction written primarily for a female audience.

American and British writers alike have underscored the need to focus on the lives of women, especially friendship between women. Susan Glaspell, an American dramatist working during the early twentieth century, poignantly illustrates the paucity of strong relationships among women in her play

Trifles (1911). Toward the end of that play, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, the play's main characters, reflect on the bare and friendless existence of their neighbor, Minnie Wright. Mrs. Hale admits to Mrs. Peters that "We live close together and we live far apart. We all go through the same things--it's all just a different kind of the same thing" (44). In contrast, the male characters in the play assume that the women, by virtue of their sex, are naturally friends. For instance, the County Attorney says, "Ah, loyal to your sex, I see. But you and Mrs. Wright were neighbors. I suppose you were friends, too" (38). *Trifles* plays on the men's assumptions that all women "stick together," while the play's reality--the reality of women's lives, the play suggests--illustrates the alienation between women and the difficulties of bonding.

In *A Room of One's Own*, British writer Virginia Woolf reflects wryly on the negative depiction of women's friendship in literature:

> [A]gain I am reminded by dipping into newspapers and novels and biographies that when a woman speaks to women she should have something very unpleasant up her sleeve. Women are hard on women. Women dislike women. (115)

Yet Woolf is one of the very few writers/critics who has called attention to the ambivalences and underlying conflicts in women's friendships.

In more recent decades, critics have begun to focus more pointedly on the depiction of women's friendship in literature. Social historians, too, recognize its cultural significance. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg calls women's friendship, although a "hitherto ignored aspect of social relations," nevertheless an "important area of cultural and historical analysis" (30).

Feminist critic Carolyn Heilbrun in *Reinventing Womanhood* (1979) discusses the need to discover why women have often failed to bond together in solidarity. Heilbrun concludes that the "failure of women to find 'support systems' among themselves is certainly close to the heart of the problem" (26). In both history and in literature, women have encountered difficulties when attempting solidarity.

Work by Gillian Frith and Carol Lasser focus on women's friendship in nineteenth-century fiction. Frith's dissertation entitled "The Intimacy Which is Knowledge: Female Friendship in the Novels of Women Writers" (1988) provides an interesting thematic investigation of women's friendship as an evolving construct. Frith's study examines the ways in which education and science altered women's friendships. Frith's work, though, examines Victorian writers' works. Carol Lasser's article "'Let Us Be Sisters Forever': The Sororal Mode of Nineteenth-Century Female Friendship," also published in 1988, argues that the relation of sisterhood offered an influential model for female

friendships that flourished in the nineteenth century (180). This model of sisterhood, Lasser says, provided a paradigm for the "great social movements in the nineteenth century" (165).

In 1989 Dorothy Jones's article "Olivia and Chloe: Fictions of Female Friendship" appeared in *Australian Literary Studies*. Jones's study examines the portrayal of women's friendships in literature, although in terms of its Australian context of "mateship" (3). Jones investigates such writers as Olga Masters, who, in her literary representation of women's friendship, "draws attention to the social pressures which so often divide women from each other" as well as "how extraordinarily difficult it is to retreat from those pressures" (11). Jones's study touches on some of the same issues as this study but depends upon an Australian literary context.

In contrast, many contemporary literary critics usually focus on women's friendship as a site of affection and empowerment for women, a haven free of the problems inherent in heterosexual relationships. Janet Todd in *Women's Friendship in Literature* (1980) says, for instance, that "in female friendship, the heroine can momentarily forget the feminine image she must create for a man and relax from the strenuous demands of romantic love" (2). Most literary texts reveal a much more complex representation of friendship.

Differing significantly from Todd's and reflecting more clearly Woolf's concerns, this dissertation examines the problematic areas of women's friendship as depicted in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American women's fiction. (Todd focusses on eighteenth-century British and French novels written by white, upper-class women.) Various works of fiction from this time period (1873-1915) reveal a side of women's relationships characterized by envy, rivalry, and deliberate destruction--characterisitics that certainly conflict with traditional notions of nineteenth-century women as primarily domestic, pure, submissive, and pious (Welter 21).

Focussing on selected fiction, this study explores why women's friendships are portrayed as ambivalent and troubled; that is, what elements or dynamics in the text instigate a character's unkind or "unladylike" treatment of her friend? Do these texts suggest that the prevailing social order, as portrayed in these works, negatively influenced women's relationships? How do issues of class and gender--situated as they are within the setting and context of the respective works--disrupt women's friendships within these fictional works?

This study covers four works of fiction published between 1873 and 1915: Louisa May Alcott's *Work* (1873), Mary Wilkins Freeman's short story collection *A New England Nun* (1891), Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905), and

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's utopian work *Herland* (1915). These fictional works depict friendship as a site capable of contention and acrimony. Only *Herland,* the last work studied here, suggests a means for establishing and maintaining positive relationships between women. Using materialist-feminist approaches for amplification as well as the work of social historians whose studies have examined the ideologies of gender and class, this project examines the various ideological changes in women's friendships as portrayed in these works of fiction.

Selected fiction from the era after the Civil War until just before the time of women's suffrage (1873-1915) depicts an intense period of ideological change for American women. During this time, traditional notions of womanhood were crumbling, giving way to new representations of women, as seen in fiction and other cultural documents. Nancy Armstrong's discussion of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British women's novels, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel,* examines how the novel figured as a site for the reformation of gender. Armstrong argues that "the female was the figure, above all else, on whom depended the outcome of the struggle among competing ideologies" (5). Armstrong's thesis fruitfully applies as well to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American women's fiction. The new representations of friendship--and indeed of womanhood--were shifting in the United States, too.

To understand how ideas of womanhood were changing, it is first necessary to establish the dominant ideology of womanhood that prevailed during the early part of the nineteenth century: the cult of true womanhood. In *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Barbara Welter states that the cult of true womanhood was enforced by "women's magazines, gift annuals, and religious literature of the nineteenth century" and was epitomized by "four cardinal virtues--piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (21). These virtues are depicted in various early to mid-nineteenth century texts. Mrs. John Sandford's *Woman, in her Social and Domestic Character*, published in 1833, outlines such expectations. Sandford writes that

> Domestic life is a woman's sphere, and it is there that she is most usefully as well as most appropriately employed. But society, too, feels her influence, and owes to her, in great measure, its balance and its tone. (12)

Sandford's passage illustrates the expectations of womanhood in American life.

The popular literature of the day also cheerfully dispensed such values. In Louisa May Alcott's popular novel *Little Women*, Marmee instructs her young daughters on the proper paths that they should take as they enter into womanhood: "I want my daughters to be beautiful, accomplished and good, to be well and wisely married, and to

lead useful and pleasant lives . . . . To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman, and I sincerely hope my girls may know this beautiful experience" (115-16).

Women's conduct books and pamphlets for young ladies constituted a big business in the nineteenth century and were also crucial for imparting values. While the Earl of Chesterfield outlined behaviors and manners for young men, similar advice books for young ladies appeared. Gerda Lerner in *The Woman in American History* says that in 1792 the first conduct/advice book for women appeared, *All Lady Repository*. Numerous such publications followed, and by the 1840s constituted a major industry with mass circulation: "They preached through sentimental poetry and equally sentimental fiction the culture of true womanhood" (32). Sarah E. Newton, author of *Learning to Behave: A Guide to American Conduct Books before 1900*, posits that conduct books shaped nineteenth-century "notions of womanhood . . . and [have been] powerful influences on the development of female literary characters in early American fiction" (5). *Godey's Lady's Book*, the prototypical lady's text, boasted a circulation of 150,000 (Lerner 33). Such works dispensed advice for young women and brides concerning housekeeping duties, giving and receiving gifts, letterwriting, conversation, and visiting, among numerous topics; however,

these texts more often than not also show the value of friendships.

Many of these conduct books focussed at least one section on the generation and maintenance of friendships. Even those works that focus primarily on advice to brides still make mention of duties to friends and offer advice for the sustaining of friendships. One such manual, *The Young Bride's Book* (1845), worries about the habit of visiting friends and the gossip that might result, warning especially against divulging "family secrets" (Freeling 43). One column from the magazine *The Ladies World*, "The Summer Girl" (1898), encourages young women to maintain friendships:

> If you make good friends, my dear girl--and why should you not?--keep them. Let them see you in the winter and find you have the same characteristics which in holiday guise, first proved attractive. Be loyal and honest. (19)

Similarly, Mrs. L.G. Abell's *Woman in Her Various Relations*, published in 1851, another advice book, provides a chapter on female friendship called "Female Companionship and Intercourse" that advises women how to best maintain friends. Abell counsels young women that "none but the upright in heart, and those who are candid and conscientious, are really capable of true and lasting friendship" (171). She describes women's need for friendship as a natural state for them: "the heart seems to require its object of warm regard and

fond attachment" (172). Although friendship may be a necessary condition for women, Abell tells her readers to avoid making friends with gossips and the cruel-hearted.

William Rouseville Alger's study entitled *The Friendship of Women*, published in 1868, attempts a kind of history of women's friendship. Alger's work--with one chapter entitled "Have Women No Friendships?"--at first glance seems to take a negative stance toward women's ability to bond. In fact, relying mostly on literary examples from Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, and Maria Edgeworth, to name a few writers, Alger attempts a comprehensive study that declares that "there is no fretfulness, spitefulness, revengefulness, equal to those of a woman . . . . there is no friendship equal to that of a woman" (29).

The material culture of the day venerated women's friendship, too. Friendship quilts, friendship books and autograph albums exchanged among friends were a feature of nineteenth-century life. One such product, *The Lady's Album*, was a book-sized text composed of blank pages wherein one's female friends could write verse and sundry observations concerning the institution of friendship. Annie M. Knight's *Lady's Album* contains many of her friends' signatures. Almost all of the entries written by friends celebrate thoughts of mutual love and friendship. Certainly, the portrayal of women as denizens of the private sphere (with

men serving as protectors of the public sphere) created rigid boundaries between men's and women's lives.

Women's increasingly close, intimate relationships with their women friends arose in part from the sharp division that existed at this time between the sexes. Social historians like Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Stephanie Coontz, Gerda Lerner, and Nancy Cott have written extensively on American women's lives in the nineteenth century; their work provides social and historical context for this study.

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*, published in 1985, is generally recognized as the most thorough and reliable source on nineteenth-century women's relationships. Her study shows social relations as socially constructed, although she does recognize psychosexual bonds between women as well. Primarily focussing on white, middle-class women in her study and relying on the letters and diaries of nineteenth-century women, Smith-Rosenberg outlines the homosocial culture among women that arose in the nineteenth century. She writes that the "gender-role differentiation within the family and within society" led "to the segregation of women and men . . . . [and] this social framework . . . [helped] develop a world built around a generic and unself-conscious pattern of single-sex or homosocial networks" (60). That is, the homosocial world of women's friendships was, in effect,

created by--or at least enhanced by--the rigid social spheres reflecting gender separation.

In her complementary work, *The Social Origin of Private Life: A History of American Families 1600-1900*, Stephanie Coontz explains that the

> doctrine of separate spheres venerated not the marital relationship but the sexual division of labor. For many women, this meant the bonds among women were the emotional center of life . . . . Even after the decline of associates, "female bonds . . . formed a denser social and emotional network than ties between the sexes" . . . [as] letters and diaries of Victorian women reveal an intense, often passionate glorification of female love. (279)

Smith-Rosenberg also notes that while traces of these intense social bonds continue today, it was vital to nineteenth-century women's lives because

> these female friendships served a number of emotional functions. Within this secure and empathetic world women could share sorrows, anxieties, and joys, confident that other women had experienced similar emotions . . . . This was, as well, a female world in which hostility and criticism of other women were discouraged, and this was a milieu in which

> women could develop a sense of inner security and self-esteem. (64)

Women's valuation of one another seemed, then, largely contingent on the fact that they had no one else to whom to turn. Because they could exert little or no influence in the public sphere of nineteenth-century American life, because their alternatives were so limited in the capitalist marketplace, "women, who had little status or power in the larger world of male concerns, possessed status and power in the lives and worlds of other women" (Smith-Rosenberg 64).

This study, however, examines narratives which depict the faltering and sometimes complete disintegration of homosociality in women characters' friendships. This is not to say that women's friendships in life or in literature were always homosocial in nature or always hostile. Indeed, many texts portray something in between, but a certain ideal behavior existed for women to follow. One might ask, then, what caused these strong homosocial bonds to disappear? Critics have theorized numerous reasons for this dissolution. In *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing*, Elaine Showalter offers insight into what instigated this counterdevelopment. She says that "by the end of the nineteenth century . . . patterns of gender behavior and relationships were being redefined. Women's culture was breaking down from the inside as early as the 1870s" (15). She explains that this change in women's relationships was a

result of women's desire and need to enter the marketplace. As the public domain of America shifted, its private face also changed. As Showalter notes, "After the Civil War, the homosocial world of women's culture began to dissolve as women demanded entrance to higher education, the professions, and the political world" (67). Showalter explains, "As historians now recognize, the period 1880-1920 redefined gender identity for American men as well as for American women" (95).

Stephanie Coontz also offers a perspective for why women's bonds, once the "emotional center of life," changed during this time (270). She again provides historical context for this change:

> Mother-daughter bonds weakened as new alternatives in work and recreation opened up for daughters, challenging the priority of female kin networks with new heterosexual ties. Yet the period from 1890 to 1920 also saw a tremendous extension of female ties in the political arena, as women entered clubs, professional associations, and political action committees in unprecedented numbers. (338)

Paradoxically, as women gained more social and employment opportunities in the public sphere, strong bonds with other

women in the private sphere often dissolved or lost their sense of primacy.

Altered, too, in the social mind was the perception of women's friendships as socially acceptable. Coontz also informs us that as scientific definitions were beginning to be formulated,

> The elevation of heterosexual couple relationships to a central place in self-fulfillment undermined the intense female networks of earlier years. Indeed, a growing chorus of politicians, educators, and physicians denounced female friendships and associations as unnatural and began to discern the ominous signs of lesbianism. (351)

Lillian Faderman, whose text *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and the Love Between Women*, stands as an important study of lesbian fiction, writes of this cultural shift in perception. Friendships between women, Faderman writes, were considered socially palatable until the end of the nineteenth century because women were deemed innately chaste and asexual (160). She notes that around World War I, society became more suspicious of women's attachments and that a once accepted form of "affectional expression . . . suddenly took on the character of perversion" (177).

But other social and historical matters also helped to shift women's relations away from homosociality. The lack of

marriageable men after the Civil War--approximately three million of whom perished--denied many women the opportunity to marry, and many searched for other means to support themselves. Likewise, as many men left the east coast for better farming options in the westward expansion, many women began to fill the labor force in the northeastern mills and plants (Faderman 183). Two significant inventions also led to women's entering the workplace: the typewriter in 1873 and the Bell System in 1876. These two inventions alone created more employment possibilities for women who needed to work, thus changing the face of the private sphere (Faderman 185).

But Faderman also attributes the dissolution of homosocial relations to a rather surprising factor: the antiwomanist sentiment of women themselves. She writes:

> Surprisingly, many of the most articulate antifeminists were women who in some cases felt they had invested their whole beings in the old system and were chagrined suddenly to discover a whole new crop of women arising to tell them they had "done it all wrong." (233)

Indeed, the idea of the true woman, that middle to upper-class white woman who represented the best feminine virtues, was becoming less common as a cultural reality (Welter 21). One may profitably turn to recent materialist-feminist criticism for analysis of why these kinds of social

and economic changes problematize relationships between female subjects.

In their introduction to *Feminist Criticism and Social Change*, a now standard work of materialist-feminist criticism, Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt discuss the complexities of ideology and, specifically, of gender ideology. Their study reminds us that literary critics must always question the connection between literature and "the social and economic conditions of our lives" (xv). Materialist-feminist critics tell us that a literature can never be divorced from this context. Like Tompkins, they agree that literature provides a glimpse of a culture's practices and values.

Newton and Rosenfelt also advocate a more various reading of power relations. Materialist feminists, they say, must be careful not to read power as purely monolithic. Too often, feminist criticism examines "gender-based relations of power" as arising from "unchanging, universal, monolithic" power sources (xvi-xvii). Indeed, the works studied here invite a more complex reading of power, one that shows not only how women are inscribed in but also complicit in the power structure. For instance, Wharton's *The House of Mirth* shows how Lily is often complicit in her own destruction, while Gilman's short story "Turned" illustrates the possibility that women can forge alliances out of betrayal and can rewrite inherited scripts of gendered behavior.

Materialist-feminist theory also posits that literature, with its ruptures and aporias, "are also sites on which the outlines and contradictions of ideology may be made visible" (Newton and Rosenfelt xxiii). Catherine Belsey in *Critical Practice* discusses this phenomenon. She says that "contradictions" and "incompatibilities . . . exert pressure" in ideology and reveal its "contradictory discourses" (65). Belsey explains more specifically that

> [women] participate both in the liberal humanist discourse of freedom, self-determination and rationality and at the same time in the specifically feminine discourse offered by society of submission, relative inadequacy, and irrational intuition. (65)

Belsey goes on to explain that women, as well as internalizing and responding to gender ideology, react to class:

> The class structure also produces contradictory subject-positions which precipitate changes in social relations not only between whole classes but between concrete individuals within those classes. (66)

Such a class system works to divide subjects; this phenomenon works powerfully in the texts studied here, especially in Freeman's *A New England Nun* and Wharton's *The House of Mirth*.

Discussing the ways in which a capitalist, patriarchal ideology divides subjects from each other, Newton and Rosenfelt delineate as well the ways in which women's relationships can contain ambivalent and divisive moments:

> [W]omen are not viewed as an unalloyed force for good or as a unified sisterhood or nature. Women, like men, appear divided from each other, enmeshed not in a simple polarity with males but in a complex and contradictory web of relationships and loyalties. (xxvi)

Dorothy Jones, writing about Australian women writers, says that realist writers "draw attention to the social pressures which so often divide women from each other" as well as "how extraordinarily difficult it is to retreat from those pressures" (11). Materialist-feminist theory articulates the nuances and complexities involved in the arena of women's friendships.

Social history and materialist-feminist theory provide a particularly useful context for this study; however, much remains to be written in literary criticism about the dynamic area of women's friendship in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century fiction. While literary critics such as Tess Cosslett, Susan Goodman, Mary R. Reichardt, and Marjorie Pryse (most of whose work will be discussed in later chapters) have examined women's friendships, none has couched her study in the context of a materialist-feminist reading or

in light of the socio-cultural changes that women were experiencing during this time.

The writers examined here share many commonalities and thus invite a study together. All of the writers in this study were born, came of age, and began writing during a time when American women were in transition: Alcott (1832-1888), Freeman (1852-1930), Wharton (1862-1937), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935). All, with the exception of Alcott, were born just before or just after the Civil War. All, except Alcott, lived within the first four decades of the twentieth century. Even Alcott, born in the 1830s, lived and wrote during the beginning of the progressive era for women.

The fiction of Alcott, Freeman, Wharton, and Gilman all show evidence of cultural changes. Susan Coultrap-McQuin's *Doing Literary Business* focusses specifically on women writing during the nineteenth century. She explains that women who lived during the period of the 1840s to the 1880s lived during a time of

> industrial and urban growth, westward expansion, and improved communications. They were aware of voluntary associations, utopian experiments, and reform crusades, including those for abolition, women's rights, that were changing the ways people ordered their private and public lives. (7)

Alcott's *Work* and Wharton's *The House of Mirth* illustrate the growth of women's organizations, and Freeman's *A New England Nun* reflects the state of women in small-town New England.

All four writers notably produced works mostly concerned with women's lives. Besides *Work*, Alcott's best known work is *Little Women*. Freeman's most heralded short story collection is *A New England Nun*, but an earlier collection, *A Humble Romance*, also reflects her concern for portraying women's lives realistically. Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, her finest novels, feature unusual and powerful women characters. And, of course, nearly all of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's fiction and nonfiction focussed on exploring and improving the lives of women, most notably "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Women and Economics*.

These writers are not only linked by time, but they are also bound by space. Geographically, all four lived in New England or New York for a significant portion of their writing careers. Nancy Cott, in *The Bonds of Womanhood*, asserts that much of the literature disseminating the ideas on the "'cult of domesticity'" originated in New England, although it was also a "national phenomenon" (10). Certainly, this code of behavior affected these writers and seeped into their works as well.

Even though all of these writers may have resisted the powerful sway of the cult of domesticity or true womanhood values--especially in light of the recent social and cultural

changes they must have witnessed--the ideology of domesticity was difficult to avoid. As Coultrap-McQuin explains, "these prescriptions [of True Womanhood] exerted a strong influence on what was seen, understood, and said about women's lives" (11). Often, these values infiltrated women's lives and work.

Showalter reminds us, though, that the pull between homosociality and the dissolution of those bonds resulted in a new kind of women's literature. She notes that as homosociality slowly disappeared, "dissolved by cultural pressures," women's writing, or "plots," also altered (15). This study, then, focuses not on that "new" literature featuring the New Woman but instead on the transition between competing ideologies. The fiction in this study presents characters stranded between differing modes of thought and/or behavior, caught between the domain of homosocial bonding and the complexities and ambivalences encountered when women enter the public sphere.

The next chapter, Chapter Two, discusses Louisa May Alcott's novel *Work*, published just after the close of the Civil War in 1873. This chapter examines the tension between the private and public sphere that Alcott presents when main character Christie Devon leaves her home and the values situated there to enter the work place and encounter its secular values of competition and individualism. This chapter shows the difficulties Christie experiences when she

enters the work world--specifically how that move complicates her friendships with women. When she enters the work world via women's work as a companion to an invalid, a governess, and so on, those tensions relax. Finally, the chapter shows how Christie's role in the novel is eventually recuperated back to the norms of true womanhood, as the novel looks toward unions between women to better women's working conditions. Ultimately, this is a novel in "transition" from "true woman" values to the "New Woman" values.

Chapter Three investigates Mary Wilkins Freeman's short story collection entitled *A New England Nun*, published in 1891. Much of Freeman's short fiction portrays women who are antagonistic toward their friends. Their conflicts arise from the fact that they are poor and their options for independent living are limited. Economically constrained as they are, Freeman's characters are often very competitive, rarely bonding with one another. Stories discussed include "The Village Singer," "The Church Mouse," "Sister Liddy," "A Stolen Christmas," and "A Gala Dress." A discussion of Freeman's work provides an apt transition between Alcott and Wharton. While women's friendships in Freeman's short fiction seem contentious at the stories' outset, they just as often result in bonding by the stories' end.

The House of Mirth offers no such compromise. The fourth chapter investigates the portrayal of friendship in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, published in 1905. Of

all of Wharton's novels, novellas, and short stories, *The House of Mirth* depicts most harshly women's treatment of each other in the context of "friendship." Essentially homeless and without close family connections, Lily Bart presents a vivid example of a woman from the upper class who tries desperately to maintain her accustomed style of living and who must do so at the expense and pleasure of her female friends. Lily's pursuit of her social position delineates the ideological gulfs that exist in her relationships with other women: with Grace Stepney, with Bertha Dorset, and with Judy Trenor. Ultimately, Lily's financial distress coupled with her tendency to step outside social boundaries instigates jealousies and disastrous manipulations among Lily's alleged friends. *The House of Mirth* provides a withering assessment of how the values of capitalism infect social relationships.

Chapter Five discusses the all-female utopia of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915). *Herland* provides a good transition from *The House of Mirth*; while Wharton's novel critiques the contemporary system, Gilman's utopia offers a solution for improving relations between women. *Herland* includes an incisive critique of gender ideology in early twentieth-century America. As in her short story "Turned," *Herland* contests the possibility of female solidarity as long as men's and women's relations remain ensnared in the current prescribed gendered codes of behavior

and the capitalist system. *Herland* calls for a drastic revision of capitalist twentieth-century society. Until that occurs, Gilman's work suggests, as long as they compete for men and money, women will continue to lack meaningful relationships with others. Materialist feminists often remind us of the need for "praxis"; *Herland* offers solutions to social problems and seems an appropriate text for concluding this study.

This study concludes with a brief Afterword that refocuses the main ideas of this study. The Afterword reminds us that the complexities of women's friendship continue to be a central issue in contemporary women writers' works. The Afterword includes a brief discussion of Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), a work that both celebrates and critiques women's relationships.

As social and historical factors show, friendship was indeed a construct that altered noticeably in the fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Jane Tompkins advises, literature offers interesting and instructive examples of our cultural paradigms. These four fictional works of friendship--*Work, A New England Nun, The House of Mirth,* and *Herland*--seek solidarity between women but find little solace in a culture transforming into one increasingly focused on personal gain and profit.

Chapter Two:

Women's Friendship and the Recuperation of True Womanhood in Louisa May Alcott's *Work*

Louisa May Alcott's *Work: A Story of Experience*, first published in book form in 1873, is a valuable novel for its depiction of a nineteenth-century working woman's life in transition from the private sphere of home to the public sphere of work. This transition most accurately represents the ideological contradictions faced by Christie Devon, the novel's protagonist, contradictions which many women undoubtedly faced when the "Angel in the House" expectations of the cult of true womanhood clashed with the lived experience of working women's daily lives. These ideological conflicts are most evident in the novel's portrayal of women's relationships, in particular with respect to Christie Devon's friendships with other women in the novel.

While Christie Devon genuinely seems interested in creating and sustaining friendships, many of these friendships with women dissolve, particularly in the first six chapters of the novel, when she leaves the sanctity of the private sphere and enters the public sphere of work. Many of these early friendships are then reinstated in the latter half of the novel when Christie devotes herself wholeheartedly to the pursuits of true womanhood: piety,

purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (Welter 21). This pattern suggests that the waged world resists the maintenance of these values, as Christie is unable to sustain them while in the work world; as a result, the values of domestic ideology are recuperated back into the novel only when Christie leaves the marketplace and finds that her true calling is in the private sphere after all, and in the novel's final image, she is rejoined by many of the women who disappeared in the first six chapters of the novel.[1] Ultimately, then, *Work* is an important novel for what it tells us about the ideological contradictions experienced by women in their personal relationships when they venture outside of conventional expectations and behavior.

The novel's plot falls into two distinct parts and thus facilitates this kind of a reading. The first part, consisting of the first six chapters, details Christie Devon's search for economic independence and a sense of her own autonomy. An orphan, Christie leaves the home of her aunt and uncle and tries a series of jobs available to women at the time: servant, actress, governess, companion, and seamstress. Except for her work as a companion, Christie often learns that it is difficult to maintain a sense of true womanhood (or, as she might have termed it, being a "good

[1] By the term "recuperate," I am referring to Michele Barrett's use of the word which she defines as an "ideological effort that goes into negating and defusing challenges to the historically dominant meaning of gender in particular periods" (82). By the recuperation of true womanhood in Work, I am arguing that the proto-feminist tendencies exhibited in the novel's first few chapters are recuperated into the ideology of true womanhood, as seen in the novel's second half.

woman") in light of the indignities of the work world. After her employment as a seamstress is curtailed because of her association with Rachel, a "fallen woman," Christie becomes depressed, despairs of ever finding a home and friends of her own, and contemplates suicide. This chapter, entitled "Through the Mist," initiates the second part of the novel.

From that pivotal chapter on, the book takes a distinct turn from Christie's search for public employment to her search for home and family. The subsequent chapter titles allude to this change. Such title headings as "A Cure for Despair" and "Little Heart's Ease" portray Christie's longing for emotional fulfillment, a definite move from her initial desire for economic autonomy in the waged world. During the second part of the novel, Christie meets two women, Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Sterling, who have a profound effect on the rest of her life and who redirect her focus to the joys of being a wife and mother. After her marriage to David Sterling, Mrs. Sterling's son, and after her subsequent widowhood, Christie decides to devote her life to helping working women, and she becomes a liaison between working class and leisure class women. The novel ends with an image of both classes of women, black and white, young and old, gathered together and vowing to work for one another to better women's working conditions.

While critics have focused on the importance of women's relationships in the novel, they have not grounded their

discussion in the context of women's friendships, an important cultural phenomenon and a profoundly vital relationship for many nineteenth-century women, as was discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter will examine Christie's friendships with other women in *Work* as indicative of the ideological transitions and contradictions that occurred in women's lives. First, I will examine the ambivalences in her relationships with other women in the first six chapters of the novel when she enters the work world. In these first chapters, we can see the inevitable conflicts that arise when her desire to be a "good woman" clashes with the values of competition and self-interest encountered in the public sphere. For example, when Christie takes up those qualities thought necessary to success in the public sphere, as she does in "Actress" when she competes with Lucy for acting roles, her friendships suffer. Yet, the novel resists having her fall prey to these unwomanly traits altogether; the first six chapters also reveal how resistant ideologies of gender are to change. After a discussion of these chapters and her eventual disillusionment with the public sphere's detrimental effects on personal relationships, I will demonstrate how, in Christie's turn from the waged world of work to the conventional expectations and duties in the domestic sphere found in the novel's last fourteen chapters, her relationships alter dramatically. Her friendships with women

are recontextualized as familial, as her most important women friends become mother or sister figures to her. At first unable or unwilling to depict adequately the complexities of women's relationships when experienced in the context of work, the second half of the novel recasts these relationships in familial terms, demonstrating a recuperation of the values of true womanhood, while the values associated with the public sphere (and men, too, for that matter) disappear from the text.

What is remarkable about *Work* is not just its value as a cultural document that embodies the ideological contradictions in women's lives but the fact that Alcott was able to complete it at all due to those same contradictions in her own life. Her experiences during the twelve-year span in which she worked intermittently on *Work*'s manuscript represent some of the tensions between her duties to her family and her success in the public world of writing and publishing. When Alcott began *Work* in January 1861, she originally intended to write a novel that would convey her own experiences as a working woman (*Letters* 87). Because of her apparent dedication to the nineteenth-century women's movement, to her family, and to her own work, Alcott's progress on the novel was quite slow and was interrupted by her participation as a nurse during the Civil War; her care of her chronically ill mother, Abba Alcott; her trip to Europe; and by her work on other fiction like *Moods* and

Hospital Sketches (Cheney 161). The actual conditions under which Alcott composed also reveal the competing strains of true womanhood (seen in Alcott's duties to her mother and family) and her own professional commitments (evident in her travel outside Concord and her own work as a writer) in her own life. Elbert explains that

> The years between 1861, when Louisa began *Success*, and 1873, when the novel was finally completed as *Work*, included her most productive literary efforts and also her liveliest involvement in active social reforms. Her struggle to achieve security and to define her own life as an independent woman also sharpened her awareness that many of the problems of her personal life were embedded in the contradictions of woman's role in American society. ("Introduction" xxiii)

Alcott's own awareness of the stress of family and work is evident in her personal letters as well. In February 1864, Alcott recorded her anxieties about not finishing *Work*: "Took a turn at my poor 'Christie' book [*Work*] which will never get done I am afraid" (*Letters* 128). However, in 1872, acting on encouragement from Henry Ward Beecher, Alcott records in her journals that she is preparing a "serial story" for *The Christian Union* for $3000 (*Journals* 183). The monetary promise proved to be the incentive Alcott needed to

complete the novel, although this last stage nevertheless proved stressful. In November 1872, she says that "One thousand dollars was sent as a seal on the bargain, so I was bound, and sat at the oar like a galley-slave" (Cheney 267). Just one month later she writes that, in order to satisfy *The Christian Union*'s request for a serial novel and her publisher's desire for a novel, she wrote "three pages at once on impression paper, as Beecher, Roberts, and Low of London all want copy at once" (Cheney 268). Upon completion of the novel, in February 1873, Alcott expresses chagrin at the final result: "Not what it should be,--too many interruptions. Should like to do one book in peace, and see if it wouldn't be good" (Cheney 270). The plot inconsistencies (Christie's last name is the same as her maternal uncle's, for example) are perhaps the result of the difficult twelve-year span in which Alcott worked on the novel. Alcott, who expressed exasperation at the novel's fragmented structure, was not the only reader critical of the outcome (Cheney 270).

Little Women was first available to the public in 1868, and its tremendous popularity undoubtedly affected *Work*'s critical reception. Although some critics praised Alcott's later novel, many critics harped on its narrative flaws and ideological miscues. One unnamed reviewer in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* calls the novel's first half "a series of sketches" lacking "even the semblance of a plot" (186). This

same reviewer does, however, commend the moral sweetness in the novel's second half; in particular, those chapters depicting the Reverend Power and Mrs. Wilkins are praised for their quaint portraits of domestic harmony. Another unnamed reviewer in the *Lakeside Monthly* harangues Alcott's creation of a "Madam Work" (187) and says that "this book is the story of a female who was not a woman" because of her focus on discipline and work (191). An anonymous reviewer in *The Athenaeum* in 1873 says that *Work* does not compare with Alcott's other fiction: "we miss the cheery energy there was in *The Old-Fashioned Girl, Little Women, Good Wives* . . . ." This same reviewer laments Alcott's not-so-happy ending: "she does not even leave [Christie] to be 'happy ever after,' when her tasks are finished and the rightful Prince has come . . . . The reader feels that a little bit of happiness would have been much better for everybody" (185). Susan Coultrap-McQuin in *Doing Literary Business* provides an interesting discussion of nineteenth-century women writers' treatment by the predominantly male critical establishment. Coultrap-McQuin asserts that those writers whose works were more closely allied with societal expectations of women's place were rewarded with positive reviews; she says that "Reviewers praised most highly those novels that kept women in their sphere" (12). In this light, *Work*'s sour reviews may reflect the public's desire that Alcott write another *Little Women*, a novel about a mother's guidance and nurturance of her

daughters, a novel that contains all the virtues of domestic ideology.

Alcott's subsequent literary reputation, like her critical reception, also reflects conventional expectations of what a woman writer's interests should entail. In fact, her reputation has dramatically altered since the reissue of many of her adult novels and since the discovery and republication of much of her sensationalist fiction, all of which have taken place since the 1970s. While she supported herself and her family through the 1860s by writing such sensationalist thrillers as *Behind a Mask: or, A Woman's Power* and *V.V.; or, Plots and Counterplots*, Alcott was not widely recognized as the author of these sometimes lurid and subversive tales, primarily because she published many of them under pseudonyms, no doubt due to their sometimes transgressive nature. Although adept at this genre, Alcott's success as a children's writer dramatically shifted her creative focus. The results of *Little Women*'s popularity, in particular, were phenomenal (*Little Women* sold 96,000 copies its first four years in print), not to mention lucrative, for Alcott, the family breadwinner, and its publication thrust her into nineteenth-century celebrityhood (Kaledin 259). From then on, she "could ask what fees she chose and . . . could get anything she wrote published without question" (Alderson xx). Alcott's letters reveal that her motives for writing juvenile fiction were, in fact, mostly monetary ones;

she wrote to one young admirer in 1878 that "Though I do not enjoy writing 'moral tales' for the young, I do it because it pays well" (*Letters* 232). However, she also often "complained that the success of *Little Women* confined her to a particular style and subject matter" (Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 55). The immense popularity of *Little Women* crystallized the public perception of Alcott as a writer of children's fiction, despite evidence that asserts that her literary tastes were often otherwise.

Much of our earlier view of Alcott as a children's writer, promoted in scholarship written prior to World War II, has been shaped through Ednah D. Cheney's *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals*. A valuable text because of its writer's actual acquaintance with the Alcott family, Cheney's volume portrays Alcott as "the greatest and most popular story-teller for children in her generation" (Cheney iii). Although acknowledging its importance, several critics have concluded that Cheney carefully constructed an image, some say a myth, of Louisa May Alcott as a dutiful daughter and a writer of juvenile literature, an image that does not reveal Alcott's versatility as a writer and does not disclose the many aspects, positive and negative, of Alcott's personality. For example, Alma Payne's bibliographic essay on Alcott scholarship illuminates the enduring impact of Cheney's portrait of Alcott; she speculates that "Cheney's position as observant family friend gave authenticity and

foundation for the 'Alcott myth'" (279). Another pitfall of relying on Cheney's work lies in the fact that Cheney edited Alcott's journals, expunging those sections that might undermine Alcott's position as the premier children's writer. While Cheney claims that Alcott deleted passages of her journals, more recent scholars think that Cheney herself was responsible for such a maneuver. Alderson observes that Cheney "wanted to preserve the myth of 'Louisa Alcott, the children's friend,'" and says Cheney's volume contains "no hint of the lurid and sensational stories, although the evidence of these was recorded among [Alcott's] original notebooks and correspondences" (xxii). Madeleine Stern, whose work on Alcott began with her biography of Alcott in 1950 and continues with her publication of Alcott thrillers as recently as 1995, has been most instrumental in retrieving, collecting, and publishing many of Alcott's writings and in advancing more varied research into Alcott's works. The publication of Alcott's letters and journals in 1987 and 1989, respectively, has also added to our knowledge of this most diverse writer.

Certainly, the interest in reviving the work of women writers spawned by the women's movement in the 1960s and especially in the 1970s has done more for Alcott studies than has anything else. Alcott's *Work* seems especially suited to the concerns of the women's movement, with its focus on women's economic independence and solidarity. Its reissue in

1977 was instrumental in generating critical interest in *Work* and in other Alcott fiction. Reviews of the 1977 edition reflect scholars' interest in its compatability with issues then considered seminal to the women's movement and in its usefulness for women's studies classes. For example, a 1978 review in *Kliatt* calls *Work* "Among the very best of the women's writing that the feminist movement has discovered" and finds in it connections to nineteenth-century women's agitation for equal rights: "*Work* should be a favorite in women's literature courses; it provides valuable material on nineteenth-century America and the early women's rights movement" (4). Similarly, in 1978, Carol Kolmerter writes that *Work* will "contribute to the growing body of scholarship in women's studies" and says that *Work*'s importance lies in its significance "as an historical document and as a key to understanding our past as women" (905, 909). While these reviews foreground the novel's political connections to the ongoing women's movement, since the 1977 Schocken Books reprinting of *Work* and since Sarah Elbert's accompanying introduction, *Work* has enjoyed more varied critical interest, as well.

Three journal articles have made significant contributions to understanding the many dimensions of *Work*. Kathleen Lant and Angela Estes' 1991 "The Feminist Redeemer: Louisa May Alcott's Creation of the Female Christ in *Work*" is particularly valuable as it situates Alcott's novel in its

contemporary religious milieu. Lant and Estes argue that Alcott drew on a number of different philosophies of the day including Transcendentalism and the ideas of Dr. Theodore Parker in her creation of a female Christ figure. Also valuable for its placing of the novel in its cultural context of the intellectual climate of Transcendentalism in Boston and Concord is Toby Widdicombe's 1992 "A 'Declaration of Independence': Alcott's *Work* as a Transcendental Manifesto." Jean Fagan Yellin's "From *Success* to *Experience*: Louisa May Alcott's *Work*" is useful for its discussion of Alcott's use of the sentimental novel form (528). Yellin's 1980 essay is also interesting for its attempt to explain some of the novel's thematic discrepancies. Yellin concludes that while the novel may not be successful in achieving its initial goals of portraying a working woman's adventures (as the adventures are truncated by Chapter Seven), it is significant that the novel's adventurous heroine remains "alive and well," unlike similar nineteenth-century heroines (539).

Although these three works provide useful readings of the novel, scholarship since the 1970s has focused almost single-mindedly on Christie's development and on the depiction of her relationships with women. Because of its inclusive portrayal of women in the last chapter, many critics praise *Work* as a novel that envisions the possibility--and the necessity--of communities of women. Elizabeth Langland states that *Work* "affirms . . . the

importance of women together, the possibility of growth in female community" (116). Similarly, Sarah Elbert, in her introduction to the novel, states that *Work*'s significance lies in its portrayal of the "formation of women's consciousness in the nineteenth-century" (xxxvii). Elbert's essay is particularly useful for the historical context that she establishes, arguing that the novel offers an "alternative proposal to the dominant society's values," a vision of women working together despite race and class polarities (xxxiii).

Several critics, however, point to Alcott's ultimately unsatisfying presentation of women's community at the novel's end. Why, many critics wonder, are the novel's first six chapters, in which Christie Devon strikes out on her own, interrupted with the romance, marriage, and motherhood sequence, only to end with a vision of women sharing labor and a common dream of equality? Laura Callanan argues that the proto-feminist tone in the first half is undermined by the novel's incorporation of domesticity in the second half. In a similar vein, Elaine Showalter says that Alcott's use of the sentimental love plot in the second half of the novel defeats the "radical social critique" begun in the first part of the work ("Introduction" xxxiv).

While these arguments all provide insightful possibilities for reading the text, they tend to fall into "either-or" readings; that is, the novel either achieves

Christie's autonomy and women's solidarity, or it does not. This chapter does not argue that the novel provides either a positive or a negative portrayal of women's relationships but, instead, focuses on those places in the novel, particularly within the site of women's friendships, that reveal the complex nature of gender ideology in the nineteenth century. For example, while Callanan says that the first part of the novel is feminist in theme and the second part is domestic, a careful reading of the novel itself reveals the constant intertwining of the two.

Work's first chapter, "Christie," introduces the novel's main character and illustrates immediately the interplay between the values of home and those of the work world, two spheres usually dissociated during the 1860s and 1870s when Alcott was writing the novel. Critics typically interpret this chapter as a feminist presentation of an independent heroine. Sarah Elbert says that the first chapter "is really a farewell to rural life . . . . and an indictment of the conventional choices for women" ("Introduction" xxv-xxvi). Actually, this scene instead reveals the intertwining of both private and public values. In the language of a proto-feminist character, Christie proclaims her own declaration of economic independence from her family (1). Although she tells her Aunt Betsey that she hates to be "dependent" and wants to go into the world to "seek [her] fortune," Christie's dramatic pronouncement takes place in the safe

haven of "women's work," in her aunt's kitchen while the two women bake bread and cakes (2). This intertwining of seemingly disparate values is also made evident when the narrator describes Christie as representative of many nineteenth-century women who desired independence yet who also wanted those things often associated with the home: "Christie was one of that large class of women who, moderately endowed with talents, earnest and true-hearted, are driven by necessity, temperament, or principle out into the world to find support, happiness, and homes for themselves" (11). In this passage we see that Christie's motivations for leaving home in search of work are rooted in need and also in a kind of "temperament, or principle," implying that her wants (and those of other women) are not yet available in the private sphere, and, like other identity-seeking protagonists, she will find her own way, independently. However, other motivations are at work here also. Even though Christie decides to go forth into the world to find a suitable career, those things she seeks--"support, happiness" and a home--are things that seem more closely affiliated with the private sphere. Although she wants to make her mark in the world, her desires are conventional ones.

This chapter also introduces a number of other important themes that will resonate throughout the novel: primarily those of motherhood and home. While Alcott dedicates the

novel to her mother, Abba Alcott, whose life, she says, "has been a long labor of love," Christie Devon, Alcott's protagonist, is motherless. In fact, her parents are both dead; she lives with her aunt and uncle, characterized as well-meaning but provincial. And although she chooses to leave the home of the only family she has, Christie clearly longs for family, especially a mother, in this first chapter. Several moments in this first chapter describe her feelings of loss surrounding her mother's death. Although the chapter begins with Christie contemplating her own independence, it ends with Christie contemplating her memories of her mother, "so like herself, who had borne the commonplace life of home till she could bear it no longer" (11). Mother and home--both powerful signifiers of domesticity--or their lack, as much as women's independence, are thus closely affiliated in *Work*'s first chapter. In fact, while the novel initially vivifies a nineteenth-century working woman's search for economic viability, her desire for home and family develop into predominant themes by the novel's end, demonstrating the constant intertwining of the desires of the private and public spheres.

The novel's second chapter, "Servant," begins the series of chapters that detail Christie's search for suitable employment. Like Alcott herself, Christie decides to try work as a household servant. Alcott's publication of "How I Went Out to Service" in 1874 details her own experience as a

servant and the personal indignities that she suffered there. This essay also briefly touches on Alcott's sympathy for Puah, an ill-used servant who worked in the same household. In Christie's first job as a servant to the Stuart family, she also befriends the other woman servant there, Hepsey Johnson, a runaway slave modeled after Harriet Tubman, whom Alcott knew (MacDonald 83). Despite the fact that Hepsey is black and has been ostracized by previous servants in the Stuart household, Christie tries to treat Hepsey as an equal (at least by nineteenth-century standards). For instance, when Hepsey assumes that the two women will not eat together at the same table, Christie assures her that if they can work together, then they can eat together, and the two women begin what becomes a lifelong friendship. While they work together, Christie learns that Hepsey is saving money to rescue her elderly mother from slavery. Christie vows to help and teaches Hepsey to write and count more effectively. In short, the narrator concludes that Christie was a "true friend to poor Hepsey, who loved her dearly, and found in her sympathy and affection or solace for many griefs and wrongs" (31). In turn, Hepsey helps Christie become accustomed to her new duties and teaches her patience at the outrages she suffers.

Like several of Christie's women friends, specifically Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Sterling who appear later in the novel, Hepsey acts as a mother-figure to Christie, which

relationship Christie finds appealing. In fact, the most nonthreatening and least troubled friendships that Christie experiences are with older women who treat her as a daughter. Within these friendships, there is little sense of competition, and, in fact, the older women impart to Christie those values specific to the domain of true womanhood, especially domesticity and piety. Mirroring Alcott's description of Puah as "a motherly old soul" (*Alternative* 358), *Work*'s narrator says that Christie's friendship with Hepsey "prospered" between them because Hepsey "had a motherly heart" (*Work* 28). This friendship with Hepsey establishes a pattern in the novel through which Christie finds companionship and home in a mother figure who serves as a friend. Christie's friendship with Hepsey lasts until the novel's end; however, Hepsey does not reappear until then.

Work's third chapter, "Actress," depicts the consequences when the values of the public sphere, particularly those of ambition and self-interest, override the central values of the private sphere, sympathy and domesticity. This chapter is one of the most interesting sections of the novel, for not only does it provide a glimpse into the world of small-time theater, but it also dramatically illustrates the conflicts in Christie's personal relationships when she goes to work. After Christie is fired from her job as a servant and must leave Hepsey and find employment elsewhere, Christie returns to Mrs. Flint's

boarding house where she meets Lucy Black and Mrs. Black, her mother. The two women coax Christie into becoming an actress. Despite recalling her Uncle Enos' characterization of theater as the "sum of all inequity," and perhaps in spite of his admonition, Christie decides to become an actress: "This recollection rather strengthened her purpose . . . the old defiant spirit seemed to rise up within her" (37). Her reaction to her uncle's advice shows her refusal to be submissive, as taking employment as an actress represents a bold move for her, a step into the public sphere, a move into the arena of temptation and a definite step away from the private sphere of true womanhood.

Alcott herself worked for a brief stint as an actress, and as biographer Martha Saxton notes, the name "Christie Devon" "appears in the stock company of the Boston Theater Company in the 1855-1856 season and may have been Louisa's stage name when she tried briefly to be an actress" (320). Kasson adds that

> in 1855 she performed to an audience of over a hundred people, including the English actress Fanny Kemble, and received reviews in the Boston newspapers. Although she was paid for some of her dramatic efforts, any serious thoughts Alcott had about a career in the theater had dissipated by 1856, when she apparently accepted the prevailing

> view that the stage was not a truly respectable vocation. (xiii)

Acting and the theater are preoccupations in Alcott's writing in the 1860s and in the early 1870s. Many of Alcott's sensational writings written during the 1860s (while Alcott was tinkering with *Work*) depict actresses and their troubled lives. In *Behind a Mask: or, A Woman's Power*, one of Alcott's most heralded sensational works, Alcott illustrates the connivances of one jaded ex-actress, Jean Muir. Posing as an orphaned governess, Muir plots to marry Sir John Coventry and become Lady Coventry, a goal she achieves, much to the chagrin of the novel's other women characters. In this fascinating work, Jean "unmasks" herself in the first chapter. After meeting the Coventrys for the first time, she retires to her room. Revealing her true face to the reader, she says, " "I may be myself for a few hours, if actresses ever are themselves"; she then "unbound and removed the long abundant braids from her head, wiped the pink from her face, took out several pearly teeth, and . . . appeared herself indeed, a haggard, worn, and moody woman of thirty at least" (*Unmasked* 367). Jean's actions reveal that her years as an actress have stripped her of all feminine markers; from here on, she masks herself as something she is not, a true woman.

Alcott's presentation of actresses was not wholly negative, however. In her short story "La Jeune; or Actress

and Woman," Alcott depicts a woman who is a fine actress and a true woman (of sorts). While the story's male narrator is certain of La Jeune's duplicity (because she is an actress), La Jeune reveals herself to be a talented performer and a devoted and faithful wife to her elderly husband.

In *Work*, Alcott embodies in Christie Devon characteristics of both Jean Muir and La Jeune. Her initial success initiates her self-absorption, although she does not remain so for very long. After her demeaning stint as a servant, Christie finds acting very empowering, although the stage manager's familiarities unnerve her. As an actress, Christie is able to play an Amazon Queen, certainly an empowering role for a young woman. When she dresses up as the Queen of the Amazons, the narrator says that

> Christie looked, and saw a warlike figure with glittering helmet, a shield and lance . . . . She liked the picture, for there was much of the heroic spirit in the girl, and even their poor counterfeit pleased her eye and filled her fancy with martial memories of Joan of Arc, Zenobia, and Britomarte. (41)

This passage suggests the power, or its illusion, that Christie experiences onstage. This power, however, is not without cost.

Her experience in the public sphere results in her desire for more success and power, an effect that most of

her contemporaries might have feared. As Christie becomes more focused on furthering her own success as an actress, she grows "selfish, frivolous, and vain,--intent on her own advancement, and careless by what means she reached it. She had no thought now beyond her art, no desire beyond the commendation of those whose opinion was serviceable, no care for any one but herself" (49). Christie's experience as an actress thus distances her from herself as a woman--a nineteenth-century true woman. As Keyser notes,

> Acting continues . . . to play a paradoxical role in Christie's career, as it does throughout Alcott's fiction. . . .[W]omen's comparative powerlessness predisposes them to acting, which both protects by disguising their true identity and enables them to express it in another guise. Through acting women can vicariously--and sometimes actually--experience power, but they can also, as Christie often comes close to doing, lose all sense of self. (105)

Just as Christie begins to experience her burgeoning success, however, she also begins to feel remorse about her treatment of others, especially her treatment of Lucy. As she becomes more successful as a character actress, competition for acting roles develops between Christie and Lucy, and Lucy begins to resent her friend's new-found fame:

> But as she grew prosperous in outward things, Christie found herself burdened with a private cross that tried her very much. Lucy was no longer her friend; something had come between them, and a steadily increasing coldness took the place of the confidence and affection which had once existed. Lucy was jealous for Christie had passed her in the race. (48).

Alcott intimates, then, that competition between women and varying degrees of success drive a divisive wedge between the women friends.

Her involvement in the public sphere has other powerful ramifications for her as well. Her transformation into a successful actress physically manifests itself. She begins to detect the physical traces left on her from this venture; her face seems "jaded . . . its freshness seemed gone; hard lines had come about the mouth" (*Work* 51). Although she experiences moments when she feels remorseful about her change, she thinks,

> "No one cares what I am, so why care myself? Why not go on and get as much fame as I can? Success gives me power if it cannot give me happiness, and I must have some reward for my hard work. . . ." But in spite of her reckless words Christie sobbed herself to sleep that night like a child who knows it is astray,

> yet cannot see the right path or hear its mother's voice calling it home. (51-52)

Again, the motifs of mother and home are invoked as Christie begins to realize her profound metamorphosis.

She does not allow herself to become truly jaded, however. Her return to true womanhood occurs when she is able to empathize with Lucy's romantic feelings for St. George, another actor. Once Christie finally realizes that she may be obstructing their relationship, she decides to quit acting. She realizes that while she may be a "fine actress," she wonders, as a consequence, about "how good a woman" she is (51). Sarah Elbert, in *Hunger for Home*, states that "Christie finds that actresses can remain true women only with the greatest difficulty. Sexual familiarities were commonplace, rivalries between actresses prevented real companionship, and so Christie leaves acting" (193). The chapter, and Christie's stint as an actress, comes to a close when Christie rescues Lucy from a falling prop (54). Her selfless act "won heartier applause" than Christie's "best rendering of more heroic deeds" (55). Christie's empathy and her self-sacrifice, central tenets of the ideal nineteenth-century woman, saves their friendship. However, despite Christie and Lucy's reconciliation, they do not remain close friends, and Lucy then disappears permanently from the novel. Whereas this chapter from *Work*, like several of Alcott's sensationalist works, illustrates Alcott's grappling with the

issue of the true woman entering the public sphere and the dangers therein, the rest of the novel recounts Christie's finding her way back to the values of domesticity.

In true episodic fashion, the following two chapters depict Christie's next two occupations, governess and companion to an invalid. These two employments more accurately represent women's traditional women's roles as caretaker of children and as nurturer, and their position in the text, situated after her acting stint, signals Christie's retreat to the private sphere to recover after her damaging excursion into the public world of the theater and the temptations experienced there.

After leaving the stage, Christie seeks employment more suitable for a young woman, as a governess. She decides that she must strive for a more enriching, purposeful life:

> "The stage is not the place for me," she said. "I have no genius to glorify the drudgery, keep me from temptation, and repay me for any sacrifice I make. Other women can lead this life safely and happily . . . . I'm not wise enough to keep steady there; I must return to the old ways, dull but safe, and plod along till I find my real place and work." (58)

Although this passage works to highlight Christie's sense of purpose and foreshadow the novel's eventual happy ending, this section of the novel shows that this transition from the

public sphere is not easy for Christie to negotiate. While she assumed being a governess would situate her safely in the private sphere, Christie soon discovers that the Saltonstalls' domestic life is infected by conspicuous consumerism and ennui, the very attributes she detests. The Saltonstall family is composed of an absent father (who is presumably away making money, much like Lily Bart's father in *The House of Mirth*); Mrs. Saltonstall, the mother figure who is an empty-minded clothes-horse; and, their two spoiled and ill-behaved children. Lastly, there is Mr. Fletcher, Mrs. Saltonstall's sarcastic invalid brother. For a time, Mr. Fletcher's attentions flatter Christie. Mostly, her initial plans to accept his marriage proposal are incited when she hears the neighborhood women gossiping about Mr. Fletcher as a possible husband. The women discount Christie as a prospect, mainly due to her social position, which inflames her sense of competition: "Yet the memory of their gossip haunted her, and had its influence upon her decision" (78). Clearly, the spirit of rivalry affects her. Inclined to accept his offer, Christie finally rebuffs his marriage proposal and recognizes once again the corruption of wealth and success. This chapter mediates between the temptations of the public sphere and the inherent goodness of the private sphere.

During her stint as a governess to the Saltonstalls, Christie does not develop any enduring friendships with other

women, but as a companion to invalid Helen Carroll, she is able to reconnect with her womanly virtues. While she feared that her acting experience would tarnish her feminine qualities, Christie soon finds satisfaction when practicing these virtues in her employment as companion: "She felt herself loved and trusted, saw that she suited and believed that she was doing good, as women best loved to do it, by bestowing sympathy and care with generous devotion" (104). Christie feels suited to this job because, as she confides to Mrs. Carroll, her previous experiences and her own illness have taught her "to sympathize with others and love to lighten pain" (93). Even this home proves corrupt, though. Christie discovers that the Carrolls are cursed with inherited insanity and have been "recklessly bequeathing" it to their descendents (108). The Carrolls' house, like the Saltonstalls', is another "home" ruined by passion and self-absorption.

Christie's next occupation, seamstress, enables her to meet her most compelling friend, Rachel. This chapter, "Seamstress," is the last in the series of five chapters which detail her search for employment. In fact, in Chapter Two, Christie decides that she will become a seamstress only as a last resort (17).[2] This chapter, then, marks the end of

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[2] David S. Reynolds, in Beneath the American Renaissance, briefly discusses the emergence of "seamstress literature" in the mid-1800s, which was an offshoot of the antifactory writing of the 1800s (355). That Alcott has Christie work in a sewing establishment suggests her desperation for work and instigates her eventual refutation of the public sphere in the rest of the novel.

the line for Christie, career-wise. Christie's relationship with Rachel has garnered the most interest when scholars comment on Christie's friendships, as most critics see this as her most significant relationship with a woman (Callanan, Lant and Estes). While Christie experiences with Rachel her most emotionally intense relationship with a woman to date, this friendship also proves to be her last close bond with a woman of her age, and this chapter initiates the recuperation of the values of true womanhood in the novel. In this chapter, Christie forges a close bond with another woman, and when that bond cannot be realized because of conflicts experienced in the work place, she leaves the world of public employment and devotes herself full time to the duties of women's sphere.

When Christie first takes a position as a seamstress in a "large and well-conducted mantua-making establishment" (128), she remains detached from the other working women. Although most were "well-meaning girls," Christie finds them "full of the frivolous purposes and pleasures which their tastes prompted and their dull life fostered. Dress, gossip, and wages were the three topics which absorbed them" (129). Her loneliness and her desire for her own home intensifies:

> as spring came on, the old desire for something fresh and free began to haunt her, and she had both waking and sleeping dreams of a home in the country somewhere, with cows and flowers,

> clothes bleaching on green grass, bob-o'-links making rapturous music by the river, and the smell of new-mown hay, all lending their charms to the pictures she painted for herself. (129)

Her desire for home, however, is temporarily set aside because of her friendship with Rachel.

Christie and Rachel's friendship starts tentatively, with Christie gently nudging Rachel into a slow-developing relationship. What is most remarkable about this particular chapter is that the narrative description of this friendship seems unusually personal and intimate, unlike the other descriptions of friendship in the novel in which a sentence or two sums up Christie's feelings on the matter. Christie's friendship with Rachel is the only one which she actively pursues and nurtures. Indeed, Christie pursues the shy, reluctant Rachel as a lover might: Christie "wooed this shy, cold girl as patiently and as gently as a lover might, determined to win her confidence, because all the others failed to do it" (131). Both women are in need of a friend, as both are alone in the world, and when Rachel consents to be her friend, Christie "kissed her warmly" (132).

The profound effect of Rachel's friendship on Christie proves to be the novel's turning point. After her experience with Rachel in the sewing establishment, she no longer seeks employment in the public sphere; the rest of the novel recounts Christie's rediscovering herself as a woman, a true

woman. Her feelings about Rachel inaugurate her transformation. Not surprisingly, then, Christie's emotional response to her growing relationship with Rachel is described very much in the language of the cult of true womanhood. For instance, in reaching out to another woman, Christie becomes more concerned with others, and she experiences a new kind of self-satisfaction:

> Now some one cared for her, and, better still, she could make some one happy, and in the act of lavishing the affection of her generous nature on a creature sadder and more solitary than herself, she found a satisfaction that never lost its charm. (132)

The virtues of true womanhood that Christie displays reveal how imbedded domestic ideology is in her personality. However, scandal disrupts this powerful connection and reveals how qualities associated with the public sphere threaten those values affiliated with the private sphere.

Suspicious of Rachel, Miss Cotton, the sewing establishment's forewoman, makes inquiries into Rachel's past and discovers that she has been "quite the reverse" of a "respectable and worthy girl" (135). In turn, Miss Cotton asserts that Christie has made a dire mistake in befriending Rachel: "you will find that *you* have made a very great [mistake] in choosing Rachel for your bosom friend instead of some one who would be a credit to you" (135). Like the nuns

in Kate Chopin's "Lilacs" (1894) who banish the worldly Adrienne from their convent forever, Mrs. King and Miss Cotton are indignant at a "fallen" woman tainting their establishment and the other women there. Because of her allegiance and support of Rachel, Christie is also exiled from her position as a seamstress (141). Christie thus learns what Elbert terms the "full contradiction of individualism." Her experience at the seamstress establishment results "in the betrayal of all that ideology had promised to Christie. The waged job invalidated the principles of true women. Profit supersedes moral responsibility and charity must be measured by its price" ("Introduction" xxxii). Lant and Estes illuminate the conflict further:

> Alcott's juxtaposition of the intimate and supportive bond between Christie and Rachel with the divisive self-interest of Mrs. King and Miss Cotton, the shopowner and her forewoman, underscores the importance which Alcott places on women's compassion and support for one another. Mrs. King and Miss Cotton together represent the realm of "King Cotton": a system of patriarchal values with which the feminine sensibility, embodied by Christie and Rachel, becomes trapped. (237)

While Lant and Estes correctly illustrate the novel's satire of the waged system and its effect on women's relations, it is also significant that the novel never reestablishes the intensity of Rachel and Christie's friendship. Ultimately, her experience with Rachel and the sewing establishment has a disillusioning effect on her. The novel's most intense portrayal of female friendship occurs in this section; ultimately, though, the women's relationship cannot continue to thrive in the corrupt world of commerce. Alcott might also have abandoned further developing the women's relationship precisely because of its emotional intensity, for the novel works toward Christie's marriage to a man with Rachel established as a sister figure.

When Rachel leaves her to find her own way and to make peace with her past, Christie struggles to find work, again becomes lonely for a home of her own, and falls into despair, as Chapter Seven, "Through the Mist," recounts. In this chapter, Christie catches "glimpses of home-love and happiness that made her heart ache for very pity of its own loneliness" (155). From this point on, Alcott's novel takes a new direction.

After Chapter Six, Christie rearranges her priorities from searching for work and independence to searching for God and home. The novel's chapter titles also illustrate this change. The first six chapters, with titles like "Servant," "Actress," and "Seamstress," sound more work-oriented than

the subsequent fourteen chapters, with such titles as "A Cure for Despair," "Beginning Again," and "Little Heart's Ease," which have a decidedly emotional tone. In fact, after Chapter Six, "Seamstress," Christie's search for economic independence ends, and her journey toward true womanhood begins in earnest. Her attempt for economic autonomy proved futile and unsatisfying. The novel's first chapter alludes to the intertwining of home and motherhood, and the second half of the novel works toward that theme.

After Rachel's departure from her life, Christie never sustains a close relationship with another woman, except with Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Sterling who treat her as a daughter, not as a sister. Acting on Rachel's advice, Christie goes to live with Mrs. Wilkins, who befriends her and nurses her back to health, and under her care, Christie finds comfort in the domestic activities of housework and childcare. Sensing Christie's depression, Mrs. Wilkins tells Christie the story of her own fall from grace and her eventual redemption. As a young married woman, Mrs. Wilkins relates, she became bored with her roles as wife and mother and longed for her maidenly independence. After the death of her young daughter, Almiry, and after nearly losing her family, Mrs. Wilkins chose to return to them. Mrs. Wilkins' homily has a profound effect on Christie: "It was a very humble little sermon that Mrs. Wilkins preached to her, but she took it to heart and profited by it" (196). Under the care of Mrs. Wilkins and

her children, Christie begins to heal; Mrs. Wilkins' mentoring, in turn, prepares Christie for her stay at the Sterlings, where she remains for the rest of the novel. Showalter comments on the effect of Mrs. Wilkins' maternal friendship: "In the maternal world of love and ritual, the motherless Christie seems to regress into pre-Oedipal domesticity and sentimentality" (*Alternative* xxxiii). Showalter's observation is a somewhat negative one; indeed, her characterization of Christie's search for a mother figure as a kind of regression might just miss the point. Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Sterling are compelling mother figures for Christie, who seeks emotional closeness with women throughout the novel. Unable to reconcile friendship with her experience in the public sphere, she finds comfort in a maternal figure. Besides reacquainting Christie with the pleasures of homelife, Mrs. Wilkins also introduces her to religion via the Reverend Power, further reinforcing Christie's return to domesticity.

Buoyed by Mrs. Wilkins' nurturance and the Reverend Power's guidance, Christie leaves the Wilkins' home and finds a "new home" with the Sterlings, Quakers who live nearby (219). In the pastoral setting of the Sterling home, Christie finds a home, a mother figure, and dignified work. Her ambitions turn from work in the public sphere and its inherent risks to what she thinks she needs: "the protection

of a home, wholesome cares and duties; and, best of all, friends to live and labor for, loving and beloved" (244).

The subsequent chapters consistently develop the affectionate mother-daughter relationship growing between Christie and Mrs. Sterling. As Christie tends the homescape with Mrs. Sterling, the two women forge a strong bond. Their relationship is described thus:

> Christie had won [Mrs. Sterling's] heart long ago, and now was as devoted as a daughter to her; . . . Christie often called her "Mother," and felt herself rewarded for the hardest, humblest job she ever did when the sweet old voice said gratefully, "I thank thee, daughter." (288)

In completing domestic tasks under Mrs. Sterling's supervision, Christie receives the validation that she craves in a suitable environment for a young woman (unlike that of the theater), and Mrs. Sterling passes on those virtues dear to the private sphere, especially piety and domesticity. Tess Cosslett in *Woman to Woman: Female Friendship in Victorian Fiction* describes the importance of the mother-daughter bond in the transfer of conventional gender roles. She says that "even more important than female friendship in reproducing the values of this traditional women's world was the mother-daughter bond" (7). This bond provides "physical and emotional sustenance, moral influence and example, and

social initiation into the world of adult womanhood and marriage" (Cosslett 12). Further, as Smith-Rosenberg says, such mother-daughter bonds served as "an apprenticeship system. . . . mothers and other older women carefully trained daughters in the arts of housewifery and motherhood" (322). This recuperation of true womanhood is thus enacted in Christie's relationships with women friends who simultaneously serve as mother figures. As Nancy Theriot says in her study of the mother's role in the daughter's acculturation into true womanhood, "At the core of the mother/daughter relationship was a recognition of mutual confidence and friendship" (77). Within these mother-daughter relationship/friendships, Christie finds the companionship and love that she desires without the conflicts she experienced in her friendships when she entered the public sphere. Under Mrs. Sterling's care, Christie devotes herself to domestic tasks and church and discovers that "home was woman's sphere after all" (Alcott, *Work* 288).

Her marriage to David is the culmination of Christie's transformation into becoming a true woman. As a married woman, Christie fulfills expectations of a typical nineteenth-century woman's life, at least ideologically so. In fact, in a conversation with David, Christie tells him that she has difficulty interacting with women; instead, she prefers male companionship:

> "as a general rule, men have been kinder to me than women; and if I wanted a staunch friend I'd choose a man, for they wear better than women, who ask too much, and cannot see that friendship lasts longer if a little respect and reserve go with the love and confidence." (269)

Her statement seems a little surprising in light of the fact that there is no evidence in the text that Christie has any male friends, except for the Reverend Power. But it is not surprising as it reflects the ambivalence with which Christie's friendships are treated throughout the novel. Her friendship with Rachel was a significant one in her life, especially if we are to take seriously the depression that Christie suffers as a result of their parting. But even that friendship is rescued and reconstituted to a more acceptable form toward the end of the novel.

Soon after Christie's realization of her love for David, whom she eventually marries, Rachel is reinstated into the text as Letty (her real name), David's long-lost sister. When Christie returns to the Sterlings, she rejoices that an entire family, "a mother, sister and lover," welcome her back (355). Rachel, who is called Letty for the rest of the book, becomes a sister-in-law to Christie, rather than a best friend. Assuming the role of the grateful prodigal daughter, sister, and aunt, Letty's role in the rest of the novel is a quiet one. Her lesser status in the novel can be explained

in several ways. Callanan speculates that because Rachel is viewed by the other characters as a "fallen woman," she becomes a possible means of tainting Christie's true woman image, and, therefore, can no longer be the primary object of Christie's affection. Tess Cosslett notes the dominant narrative patterns that emerge in fictions about women's friendship at this time. Although she focuses on British women's writing, her ideas are applicable to Alcott's novel. She says that "the coming together of two women is often essential to the resolution of the plot, figuring as a necessary stage in the heroine's maturation and readiness for the marriage that conventionally closes the action" (3). A similar pattern emerges in *Work*. When David and Christie decide to marry, Rachel rejoins the text. As was noted earlier, Christie's interactions with Rachel in prior chapters instigate her retreat to the values of true womanhood. Therefore, it seems fitting that Rachel's return to the novel be as a sister. Her return, however, also signals a loss for Christie. Reinscribed as kin instead of in her former status as kindred spirit, Rachel loses much of her potency in the text. The intimate, intense connection that characterized the women's friendship in Chapter Six is oddly lacking in their interactions in the rest of *Work*. Their reunion, about which Christie is supposedly ecstatic, is described in one sentence: "Her meeting with Letty was indescribably tender" (535). Little else is then written

about their friendship. Instead, Christie and David's relationship and marriage becomes preeminent, not Christie and Rachel's friendship.

Marriage, though, does not conclude *Work*; women's solidarity does. David's death takes place three chapters before the conclusion, and the novel's final chapters depict Christie's search for meaning in her life. She finally finds it in her familial relationships with Mrs. Sterling, Rachel/Letty, and Ruth, her newborn daughter. On the brink of despair prior to the birth of her daughter, Christie proclaims "'Don't let me die: I must live for baby now" (413), further maintaining the importance of motherhood--and its associative characteristic, sacrifice--in the novel. Once Christie has found a mother in Mrs. Sterling and become one herself, the next issue to resolve is to find some kind of dignified work that can embody characteristics so dear to domestic ideology.

No doubt because of her own experiences, the plight of working class women gains her sympathies, and Christie's involvement in the cause of working women concludes the novel. Somewhat ironically, then, a woman who once told her husband that she has difficulty dealing with women eventually becomes a leader of a coalition of working women, acting as a liaison between the working class and the leisure class. While attending "one of the many meetings of working women, which had made some stir of late," Christie observes "how

difficult it was for the two classes to meet and help one another in spite of the utmost need on one side and the sincerest good-will on the other," and she decides to stand up and speak (425). While Alcott never discloses the actual words of Christie's speech to the working women, her effect on them is rendered as powerful. Her audience finds her more than suitable, as "Hardship and sorrow, long effort and late-won reward had been hers they knew; wifehood, motherhood, and widowhood brought her very near to them" (429). Her success as a mediator leads her to decide that "this is the task my life has been fitting me for" (430).

The novel's final image of a "loving league of sisters, old and young, black and white, rich and poor" clasping hands with Christie serves as an important symbol of the novel's concluding theme: the value of women's solidarity (Alcott, *Work* 442). This last chapter, while looking toward feminist goals, also enacts the refiguration of true womanhood that was taking place in the late nineteenth century and that made such reforms possible. In *Verging on the Abyss*, Mary Papke discusses the correlation between true womanhood ideology and the changing status of women: "One result of the ideology of true womanhood was that an increasing number of women did begin to perceive themselves as a specific group, a first step in a new social consciousness" (17). Susan Coultrap-McQuin similarly notes that women's position in the private sphere "spawned a collective activity of nineteenth-century

women in voluntary associations and reform crusades" (9). That certainly seems to be what is enacted in the last chapter of *Work*, as Christie thinks to herself that "this new task seems to offer me the chance of being among the pioneers, to do the hard work, share the persecution, and help lay the foundation of a new emancipation whose happy success I may never see" (431).

Because *Work* concludes with such a utopic ending, with the image of a "loving league of women" of all ages, both races, and classes, it becomes easy to overlook the fact that the novel neglects to negotiate the ways such a union of differences can be forged. Indeed, the novel refrains from depicting potential conflicts within Christie's relationships with women when they occur in the public arena of work, much less potential ones that might erupt within such a disparate group of women. When Christie takes up those qualities thought inherent in the public sphere, as she does in Chapter Three when she competes with Lucy for acting roles, her friendships suffer. Yet the novel resists having her fall prey to these unwomanly traits altogether. In her turn from the waged world of work toward the conventional expectations and duties in the domestic sphere, enacted in the novel's later chapters, her relationships alter profoundly. Louisa May Alcott's *Work*, then, proves a fascinating novel for its depiction of women's friendships as a site of ideological flux. Later writers, like Mary Wilkins Freeman, Charlotte

Perkins Gilman, and Edith Wharton, would also take up the challenge of writing about women's relationships, seeing them as a place of both profound ambivalence and loving support.

Chapter Three:

"she at once admired and despised her":

Friendship in Mary Wilkins Freeman's *A New England Nun*

Because of its often conflicted portrayal of women's friendships, Mary Wilkins Freeman's second published collection of short stories, *A New England Nun* (1891), provides an interesting transition from Louisa May Alcott's *Work*.[1] While *Work*, in its final chapter at least, envisions women's community as a utopic possibility, Freeman's *A New England Nun* reveals a world in which women's relationships are a site of both contention and bonding. But while *Work* often omits the details of Christie's ambivalent feelings toward her women friends as well as the reason for the erasure of difference between women in the concluding chapter, Freeman's short fiction details all too well the ambivalence at the heart of the women characters' relationships.

The stories in *A New England Nun* encompass a wide array of themes, ranging from the psychological effects of economic impoverishment in "Sister Liddy" to the social stigma of homelessness in "A Church Mouse" to issues of individual autonomy in various works. Freeman's use of certain subjects, like homelessness, is unique to her work, because

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[1] Before she married Dr. Charles Freeman in 1902, Freeman published *A New England Nun* under her maiden name, Mary E. Wilkins. While many contemporary critics still call her Mary E. Wilkins, I have chosen to use her married name, Freeman, as she requested after her marriage.

most regionalist writers of her time did not recognize them as proper content material. Although she often depicted men's struggles for integrity under adverse economic conditions, as in "A Village Lear," Freeman is most well known for her stories about women's lives and their interpersonal relationships with their families and with their friends. These stories often present mother/daughter relationships, sisters' interactions, as well as friends' relationships.[2]

When Freeman published *A New England Nun* in 1891 at age thirty-eight, the New England in which she had lived the greater portion of her life (before marrying Charles Freeman and moving to New Jersey) was experiencing a significant decline. The Civil War had ended twenty-six years earlier, and its aftermath impacted many towns and villages, including Randolph, Massachusetts and Brattleboro, Vermont, where Freeman lived. Many men who survived the Civil War were leaving New England for the lure of economic prospects in the western United States or abroad. Perry Westbrook describes the New England that Freeman grew up in as experiencing the "lowest ebb of its cultural history . . . . The Civil War,

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[2] Freeman's most frequently anthologized short stories are those depicting women's relationships. Most recently, "Old Woman Magoun," "A Church Mouse," and "The Revolt of Mother" appeared in volume two of the second edition of *The Heath Anthology*. "A New England Nun" and "The Revolt of Mother" appeared in the third edition of *The Norton Anthology*. "On the Walpole Road," "A Mistaken Charity," "Sister Liddy," "A Village Singer," "A Church Mouse," "A New England Nun," and "A Poetess" all appear in *American Women Regionalists 1850-1910: A Norton Anthology*. All of these stories illustrate relationships between women as well as women's relationships to their communities.

the Westward migrations, and industry had drained the countryside of much of its population" (1).

Also contributing to New England's decline was the demise of small, town-based industries that could not compete with the factories in the larger cities. By the 1860s, according to Jeri Parker, Freeman's hometown of Randolph had "lost its distinguishing asset--industry. The town's once thriving shoe-making business had been quickly swallowed up by larger enterprises" (51). Michele Clark discusses the harsh economic times in New England after the Civil War and the resultant decrease in population:

> The farmers, on their small, rocky, snowbound farms, could not compete in the new national market system which had been created by the expansion of the railroads and the growth of cash crop farming in the West . . . . The artisans could not compete with the price of factory-made goods. While it was not uncommon for whole families to emigrate, more often it was the young single men who packed their bags and went west or into the expanding cities. Single women, of course, were not permitted to go elsewhere. So the villages Mary Wilkins knew were filled with unmarried women "without prospects." (166)

Writing as she did in such a social milieu, about villages peopled with more women than men, Freeman's stories were some

of the first in American fiction to consider the plight of solitary women as well as the conflicts and experiences of women in a world with few men.

During her lifetime, particularly after the publication of *A Humble Romance*, her first collection of short stories, and after the publication of *A New England Nun*, Freeman was widely regarded as a skilled writer of regionalism and realism. *A New England Nun* consists of twenty-four stories, twenty-three of which had been previously published in periodicals: sixteen appeared in *Harper's Bazaar*, four in *Harper's Monthly*, and three in *Harper's Weekly* (Kendrick 51). In fact, by June 1891, Freeman had earned the admiration and editorial support of William Dean Howells, who said the stories in *A New England Nun*

> catch the American look of life, so that if her miniatures remain to other ages they shall know just the expression of that vast average of Americans who do the hard work of the country, and live narrowly on their small earnings and savings. If there is no gayety in that look, it is because the face of hard work is always sober, and because the consciousness of merciless fortuities and inexorable responsibilities comes early and stays late with our people. (21)

Howells was not the only critic who thought that Freeman ranked among the best of American realist writers of the late

nineteenth century. An unnamed critic, for example, reviewing *A New England Nun* in *The Critic* in 1891, wrote that "these stories rank even with the works of Mrs. Stowe and Miss Jewett" ("Review" 26). Among fellow writers who also admired Freeman were Hamlin Garland and Sarah Orne Jewett, both of whom Freeman corresponded with intermittently.

Mary Reichardt rightly points out that Freeman's success with her two early short story collections "was much a product of the literary climate of her time and place" ("Criticism" 31); that is, the growing popularity of realism aided greatly in Freeman's commercial and critical success. Like Howells, Freeman was sincerely dedicated to incorporating realism in her own work. In a letter to Hamlin Garland, dated March 1, 1889, Freeman discusses her commitment to realism, explaining that she could not "be realistic because it is fashionable" (Kendrick 93). Indeed, Freeman's allegiance to realism is evident in her consistent use of it throughout her work and which arose from her compassion for women and their life conditions in New England during the late nineteenth century. In April of 1885, two years before the publication of *A Humble Romance* and six years before *A New England Nun* appeared, Freeman wrote to Mary Louise Booth, her editor at *Harper's Bazaar* and also a close friend, explaining that "No body knows how some of these country women, with large families, and small purses do

work. O they are the ones I would help, if I were rich. Nothing, hardly, touches me so much" (Kendrick 62).

Besides Freeman's fidelity to realism, the popularity of monthly periodicals like *Harper's Bazaar* and the *Atlantic*, as well as the approval of William Dean Howells, the important and influential editor of *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, helped Freeman's career enormously. One need only peruse a Freeman bibliography to see that most of her short stories were published in periodicals prior to being gathered in short story collections. Leah Blatt Glasser notes that Freeman's regionalist short stories fared well in periodicals, especially women's magazines, despite their sometimes rebellious subtexts. Freeman's stories, explains Glasser, were couched "within the safe arena of women's magazines; by allowing the revolt of her women characters to succeed within the home she was able to reach that wider audience of women who lived within the restrictive boundaries of nineteenth-century patriarchy" (*Closet* 216). Glasser speculates that by publishing in women's periodicals, Freeman "wanted both to reach the widest possible audience of women in safely coded language and to succeed financially by attempting to please all readers" (*Closet* 218).

The rise in interest in regional writing by New England writers such as Jewett, Stowe, and Alcott also helped fuel Freeman's popularity. And, as Mary Reichardt states, the "antisentimental impulses of a second and third generation of

women writers as they rewrote the plots and changed the endings of the women's fiction they had grown up reading" also aided Freeman's success (*Web* 20). As long as Freeman continued to publish local color stories of New England village life, her critics found favor; however, when she deviated from short fiction to novels, the critical favor she had enjoyed diminished noticeably.

Although Freeman continued to publish short stories and novels until her death in 1930, she did not enjoy the adulation she experienced in the late nineteenth century. Her decline in favor may be due to what Nina Baym, in "Melodramas of Beset Manhood," calls "cultural preference." As Baym explains,

> There are, I believe, gender-related restrictions that do not arise out of cultural realities contemporary with the writing woman, but out of later critical theories. These theories may follow naturally from cultural realities pertinent to their own time, but they impose their concerns anachronistically, after the fact, on an earlier period. (65)

Reichardt responds to this theory of cultural preference, noting that the cultural climate at the time of the first World War created an environment in which Freeman's work, as well as the work of other women writers, was too often dismissed as unimportant. As Reichardt notes, "Freeman's

critical acceptance thus altered considerably in her own lifetime due in large part to the changing attitudes of her generation toward her female subject matter" ("Criticism" 32). For example, one male reviewer in 1899 discounts her fiction, with its focus on mostly women characters, as too narrow in scope (Thompson 668). After World War I, Reichardt continues, much of Freeman's work fell out of print: of forty-one works, as few as nine were available in print in 1930 when she died ("Criticism" 36).

Not surprisingly, then, little significant critical work was produced during the years between Freeman's death in 1930 and the 1970s. Out of this period, however, two biographies emerge. Edward Foster's *Mary E. Wilkins Freeman* (1956), the first book-length biography of Freeman, is still considered the standard biography. Foster's volume provides the first extended introduction to Freeman and a fairly balanced background to her life and major works. Unlike Alcott, unfortunately, Freeman did not leave behind any journals, nor did she have a father like Bronson Alcott who scrupulously recorded her youth so that no biography can offer a comprehensive view of Freeman's life. To fill in the gaps, Foster relies primarily on Freeman's own letters, the recollections of her friends, and the body of her writing through which he might sketch her life. Eleven years later, in 1967, Perry Westbrook also published a biography entitled *Mary Wilkins Freeman*. Westbrook's book focuses on Freeman as

a skilled chronicler of New England village life and praises her insight in portraying "the pride of the poor" (21). Westbrook's text, revised in 1988, provides more overview of Freeman's works than Foster's. These two biographies, then, were responsible in large part for generating later interest in Freeman's fiction. Another notable but less ambitious work, *The New England Art of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*, by Abigail Ann Hamblen appeared in 1966. Hamblen's text provides an analytical discussion of Freeman's writing style, particularly noting her simplicity and terseness when describing the lives of the poor.

Like Alcott, Freeman has enjoyed a critical resurgence during the last twenty-five years, part of the rising interest in women writers in general. Her short stories are now consistently published in American literature anthologies. Further, since the 1970s, more than a dozen articles as well as several books on Freeman's life and fiction have appeared. Most of these works have called for a careful reexamination of her fiction, and most focus on the powerful bonds between her women characters.

Several of these recent works have proved important in reeducating contemporary readers about Freeman's life and works. Brent L. Kendrick's *The Infant Sphinx: Collected Letters of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman* (1985) figures as a significant addition to Freeman studies. In this work, Kendrick has collected Freeman's known extant letters,

sequenced them chronologically, and provided useful biographical commentary. Leah Blatt Glasser and Mary R. Reichardt have been responsible for much of the major Freeman research done in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1987, Glasser published in *Legacy* "Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, 1952-1930," which provides a useful introduction to and overview of Freeman's life and work, and Glasser's article was thus instrumental in reacquainting contemporary readers with Freeman. More recently, in 1996, Glasser published a biography of Freeman entitled *In a Closet Hidden: The Life and Work of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*, building on previous Freeman biographies. While Glasser's study provides more comprehensive critical commentary than Westbrook's work does, she relies too heavily on Freeman's fiction as a source of biographical information. Reichardt, in turn, published "Mary Wilkins Freeman: One Hundred Years of Criticism" in *Legacy* in 1987. Reichardt's essay, which provides an historical overview of Freeman's critical reputation, is an invaluable tool. Reichardt's next major contribution, *A Web of Relationship: Women in the Short Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman* (1992), examines the various kinds of relationships between women in Freeman's fiction, such as those between mothers and daughters, as well as those between friends and rivals.

Several articles by other critics explore Freeman's position in the literary canon as an important woman

regionalist writer, as well as her insightful critiques of gender roles. Significant articles include Ann Douglas Wood's "The Literature of Impoverishment: The Women Local Colorists in America 1865-1914" and two essays by Susan Allen Toth, "Defiant Light: A Positive View of Mary Wilkins Freeman" and "'The Rarest and Most Peculiar Grape': Versions of the New England Woman in Nineteenth-Century Local Color Literature." In 1986, Elizabeth Meese's *Crossing the Double-Cross: The Practice of Feminist Criticism* devotes a chapter to deconstructing Freeman's portrayal of sexual politics, revealing the complexities of Freeman's depiction of gender and praising Freeman's "unreadable" textual moments.

Various other articles have sought to show the subtle dimensions of Freeman's subversive subtexts, and all of these works praise Freeman's fiction for its ingenuity and fresh plotlines. Alice Gardner Brand in her 1977 "Mary Wilkins Freeman: Misanthropy as Propaganda" argues the importance of uncovering and understanding the anger of women characters in Freeman's texts. Anger, Brand posits, is a symptom of great cultural complexity and, when examined, reveals Freeman's true motive: depicting the limited world of women in nineteenth-century America. Just a few years later, in 1989, Lorne Fienberg's "Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's 'Soft Diurnal Commotion': Women's Work and Strategies of Containment" appeared; Fienberg's article is extremely

valuable as it examines the economic conditions of Freeman's characters. In 1992, Kate Gardner in "The Subversion of Genre in the Short Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman" analyzes Freeman's stories as sites of "curious" plot twists and highlights the "unlikeliness" of Freeman's women characters (447; 467). In an especially provocative study, "Mary Wilkins Freeman's Devious Women, *Harper's Bazaar*, and the Rhetoric of Advertising" (1993), Monika Elbert examines the reasons for Freeman's "devious women" characters, speculating that Freeman presents women as devious as a way both to reflect and incite women's consumeristic desires. These recent articles do much to reveal the richness of Freeman's work.

While some critics have tended to characterize Freeman's women figures as forging powerful and often supportive bonds, several critics such as Monika Elbert and Lorne Fienberg have shied away from such a simplistic reading, yet neither critic discusses in depth the depiction of friendship in Freeman's work. Mary R. Reichardt's chapter "Women as Friends and Rivals" in *A Web of Relationship* does examine the often strained relations between women friends. Reichardt observes that "Very few of Freeman's women can be said to be 'friends' in the sense that they can relate to each other on an equal basis . . . . Much more commonly, Freeman portrays the relationship between women friends as unequal and thus competitive" (107). Because Reichardt's study touches on the

issue of conflict between women, as well as the issue of the competition that can exist in those relationships, her work provides a starting point but only that since she is mostly concerned with providing an overview of Freeman's fiction. Much more remains to be said, then, about how Freeman depicts women's friendships, especially in the stories comprising *A New England Nun*.

The relationships between women that Freeman illustrates in *A New England Nun* are rarely homosocial in nature. While some stories like "Christmas Jenny" show women's relationships as a site of support and fierce loyalty, many of the works in *A New England Nun*--and in Freeman's other short fiction as well--portray these friendships as conflicted arenas of rivalry and envy. A reading of selected stories in *A New England Nun* reveals a pattern of women's friendships as contentious sites of jealousy and mistrust, although the characters who experience these emotions just as often end up bonding. Three common elements appear in most stories and create a narrative pattern: economic circumstances, women's behavior toward one another, and the stories' resolutions (usually depictions of bonding, whether enthusiastic or ambivalent). Typically, the story's narrator through the realistic recording of the minutiae of women characters' daily lives reveals their often impoverished economic circumstances. These economic circumstances, constrained as they are, usually serve to heighten a

character's awareness of her own lack of social position, the awareness of which instigates her hostile treatment of her friend. This behavior is evident in characters' gossip, lies, and manipulations. Yet such negative behavior is rarely sustained throughout a Freeman short story. For example, one of the characters makes overtures of apologies and friendship to her estranged friend. This gesture usually serves as the story's denouement, although the sense of resolution and the potential bonding moment are undermined or subverted by a character's ambivalent or cruel comment. For instance, Freeman's stories sometimes conclude with a character's sour remark, as in "A Village Singer" when Candace, on her deathbed, tells Alma, a rival who has just sung for her, "You flatted a little on--soul" (36). This sudden if subtle surfacing of women's anger in Freeman's fiction is what gives readers pause. Just when Freeman's texts seem to have assuaged conflict, their endings defy closure, generating more questions than they answer. Catherine Belsey's discussion of these kinds of aporic textual moments in "Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text" is useful for understanding such ambiguous moments in Freeman's own work:

> In its absences, and in the collisions between its divergent meanings, the text implicitly criticizes its own ideology; it contains within itself the critique of its own values, in the sense that it is

> available for a new process of production of meaning by the reader, and in this process can provide a knowledge of the limits of ideological representation. (57)

As Belsey explains, the gaps and ambiguity in texts can often foreground the text's own ideological conflicts. For example, often when it appears a character will repair a friendship, make amends, proffer the lady-like gesture and apologize, she instead subverts the expected. In addition in the case of Freeman's ambivalent women friendships, we see the clash of economics and gender; most of the women's conflicts arise from fiscal jealousy, and the envy they feel overrides any impulses toward friendship.

Of Freeman's short stories published between 1887 and 1909 that contain this narrative pattern, two kinds of stories about women's relationships emerge. The first type illustrates a love triangle between two women and a man. Typically, one woman interferes (intentionally or not) with another woman's male suitor. This conflict is heightened by one or both of the women's economic circumstances. In stories like "A Moral Exigency," one character concedes her beau to a female rival, often to preserve the friendship as well as her own sense of integrity. In these stories, although men hold out the promise of financial security with the lure of marriage, women also possess certain power--the power of public opinion--which holds equal sway in their

world. "A Moral Exigency," "A Friend of My Heart," "Emmy," and "Juliza" depict women's friendships ensnared in competitive jealousy over a man. All of these stories were published either before or after *A New England Nun*, showing Freeman's early and continuing interest in the complexities of women's relationships.

The other kind of story, more common in the *New England Nun* collection than in Freeeman's earlier works, depicts a world of women in which competition between women emerges. These stories do not depict women's competition for men; instead, they portray a world of women who compete for material goods (however meager) or for status and reputation. Through description of these little hamlets bereft of the economic promise of employment or marriage, Freeman presents another world of women. Although Freeman's women characters possess little economic or political power in their communities, they scrap fiercely for the little power available in their sphere. Competition between women in these stories arises from economic insecurity and from the diminished feelings generated by such inferiority, although many of Freeman's characters share similar financial deprivations. Representative stories to be discussed are "A Village Singer," "A Gala Dress," "Sister Liddy," "A Stolen Christmas," and "A Church Mouse."

The first two stories that begin the *New England Nun* collection, "A New England Nun" and "A Village Singer," do

not feature women's friendships as their focal point, but they do begin the collection with a look at women's relationships or, in some cases, the telling lack of them. In these two stories, the main characters--Louisa Ellis in "A New England Nun" and Candace Whitcomb in "A Village Singer"--are each faced with a significant life change and must decide what action to take in order to preserve her own sense of integrity. While these two stories do not delve into the intricacies of either woman's relationships with women friends (in fact, we do not know if either character even maintains close friendships), the way in which Freeman presents each woman's attitudes to other women provides an interesting avenue into the ensuing works (like "A Gala Dress" and "Sister Liddy," for example), which do deal significantly with the problems in relationships. In "A New England Nun," Louisa "sacrifices" her beau to Lily, an acquaintance of Louisa's. Although the story focuses more on Louisa's desire to preserve her life as she desires it, the story gestures toward maintaining harmony between women friends. "A Village Singer" in particular sets up a context of women's harsh treatment of one another that resounds in the other works of the *New England Nun* collection.

"A Village Singer" begins with a church service. The story's ensuing conflict between women is hinted at in the opening paragraphs:

> In the centre of the row of women singers stood Alma Way. All the people stared at her, and turned their ears critically. She was the new leading soprano. Candace Whitcomb, the old one, who had sung in the choir for forty years, had lately been given her dismissal. (18)

Because the church congregation "considered that her voice had grown too cracked and uncertain on the upper notes" (18), Candace has been replaced with the younger Alma, who has "quite a local reputation as a singer" (19). Considered a prestigious appointment by the village, the church soloist is "the only paid musician in the large choir" (19). As such, the church soloist is held in high esteem by the church's congregation. However, when Alma launches into her first solo, her voice is eclipsed by "another female voice, singing another hymn to another tune" (19). Candace continues to sing during Alma's solos and during the later evening service as well, "to drown out the voice of her rival" (19).

The congregation considers Candace too old to be church soprano, and Candace's beau, William Emmons, also the choir leader, tells his fellow churchgoers that Candace's voice "had failed utterly of late, that she sang shockingly" (20). Not only has Candace's beau betrayed her pride with this disloyal statement, but the church congregation has unseated her as its lead soloist. They consider their surprise party

with its attendant gift of a photo album to be compensation enough for her dethronement.

Immediately after the Sunday morning service, Mr. Pollard, the minister, visits Candace to discuss her recent antics. He is so disturbed by her behavior and by having to correct it that the text of his speech to her is filled with many dashes, indicating his extreme discomfort. He even intimates that she must be unaware of her actions, for surely she would not do such a thing on purpose. Once he finishes his embarrassed reprimand, Candace unburdens herself, telling him she interrupted Alma's solo on purpose:

> I'm a-goin to speak. I want to know what you think of folks that pretend to be Christians treatin' anybody the way they've treated me? Here I've sung in those singin'-seats forty year. I ain't never missed a Sunday, except when I've been sick, an' I've gone an' sung a good many times when I'd better been in bed, an' now I'm turned out without a word of warnin'. My voice is jest as good as ever 'twas . . . . I'd like to know if it wouldn't be more to the credit of folks in a church to keep an old singer an' an old minister, if they didn't sing an' hold forth quite so smart as they used to, rather than turn 'em off an' hurt their feelin's . . . . S'pose they should turn you out in your old age, an' call in some young bob squirt, how'd you

> feel? There's William Emmons, too; he's three years older'n I am, if he does lead the choir an' run all the singin' in town. If my voice has gi'en out, it stan's to reason his has. . . . Why don't they turn him out the way they have me, an' give him a photograph album? (25-26)

Judging from Candace's extended diatribe to Mr. Pollard, which encompasses almost three pages or about eight hundred words, she feels wrongly treated by the congregation. As Marjorie Pryse rightly points out, "Freeman describes a village which finds aging offensive in women but acceptable in men" (70). Yet, even while Candace expresses herself eloquently and forcefully to the minister, she chooses to act out against Alma Way, who, although she replaces Candace as church soloist, was in no way responsible for the decision to replace Candace. The community deserves her ire for their ageist practices; however, Candace lashes out at Alma by treating her disrespectfully and through her comments to Mr. Pollard that Alma's voice "'flats the whole durin' time'" (25).

After Mr. Pollard leaves his self-righteous parishioner, Candace is left alone to prepare for the afternoon service. As she watches the parishioners file into the church, Candace sees Alma with her beau, Wilson, also Candace's nephew, and thinks "'She's thin as a rail . . . guess there won't be much left of her by the time Wilson gets her. Little soft-spoken

nippin' thing, she wouldn't make him no kind of a wife, anyway. Guess it's jest as well'" (29). Candace's remarks about Alma's appearance forecast her later attempts to sabotage Wilson and Alma's future.

When Alma's solo commences, Candace also begins to sing. As Freeman describes Candace's interruption of Alma's solo, she reveals the narrator's admiration of her:

> Straining her throat with jealous fury, her notes were still for the main part true. Her voice filled the whole room; she sang with wonderful fire and expression. That, at least, mild little Alma Way could never emulate. She was full of steadfastness and unquestioning constancy, but there were in her no smouldering fires of ambition and resolution. Music was not to her what it had been to her older rival. To this obscure woman . . . singing in the village choir had been as much as Italy was to Napoleon--and now on her island of exile she was still showing fight. (30)

The narrator's comparison of the two women thus seems to favor the rebellious Candace.

When her nephew Wilson thereafter confronts her, Candace threatens to punish him for his alliance with Alma; she tells him that when she dies, she will not will her house to him or leave him any of her money, reminding him that he will never

be able to marry Alma without the extra income. She warns him menacingly that she can ensure his future misery.

Suggesting that her diatribe has physically exhausted her, the narrator writes that after her quarrel with Wilson, Candace becomes deathly ill and dies within a week. On her deathbed, Candace seems to repent. She apologizes to the minister for her outspoken behavior and, to everyone's surprise, asks that Alma Way be brought to her so she can hear her sing. When Wilson and Alma arrive, Candace tells them they can live in her house when they marry and that "Alma can have--all my things" (35). The dash in that sentence indicates both Candace's sincerity but also her realization of her own transience. The dash too holds out the possibility or hint of Candace's negation and foregrounds her last words; she may not have wholly repented. Candace then asks Alma to sing to her, and Alma sings "Jesus, Lover of My Soul." As she listens, Candace's "face had a holy and radiant expression," as if Alma's singing is comforting her. Yet, the look "did not disappear" when Alma stops. Candace's final words, and the story's, are "'You flatted a little on--soul'" (36). Thus, Candace repents and does the "right thing" in the end, but she also humiliates her rival one last time. Candace relishes the knowledge that Alma is not the superior singer. And Freeman allows Candace to speak the last words.

"A Village Singer" is a compelling story for the way in which it moves toward reconciliation between women but ultimately rejects any form of bonding between them, as well as for the way Freeman both applauds and punishes Candace for her behavior (after all, Candace dies at the end, suggesting that her vigorous protest has completely deflated her). Candace's speech about the village's bias against old women shows Freeman's awareness that Candace should be angry at the church's treatment of her and her awareness of gender bias; after all, the church is dismissing the older female soloist but not the elderly male minister nor the elderly male choir leader. Yet Freeman has Candace demean Alma, who will ostensibly be in the same shoes Candace is in forty years from now. While Candace seems finally to do the right thing, her last words are spiteful. Candace has sabotaged Alma's debut, and her final words are meant to hurt. Pryse discusses Candace's behavior as directed against Reverend Pollard, the choir leader, and Wilson Ford, not as against Alma (72), yet this observation seems to overlook how pointed Candace's behavior is; after all, she sabotages Alma's debut, publicly humiliates her, and makes demeaning comments about her singing and her physique. Reichardt offers an interesting reading of Candace's final words: "Like the rest of the congregation, Alma also has 'flatted'--constricted or hardened--her 'soul.' Candace's quiet plea is rather for

that soul's enlargement and growth in fundamental human compassion" (150).

Ultimately, "A Village Singer" shows how women sabotage each other, or are forced to, or think they must. Consider the community's reaction to Candace's interruption of Alma. When Candace first interrupts Alma's solo, Freeman records the women's reaction first: "'It's her,' the women whispered to each other; they were half aghast, half smiling" (19). Clearly, they relish the conflict they have, unintentionally perhaps, created. Pryse sees the women's reactions to Candace's singing "as if they secretly sympathize with Candace's rebellion" (70), yet Pryse's interpretation of this section seems to idealize the women, and, after all, it is the congregation, women included, who show up at Candace's house under false pretenses to dismiss her. While it seems reasonable that Candace should express rage and act out at the community at large for their discriminatory behavior towards her, it remains puzzling that she chooses only to act out against another woman, further dividing the community.

"A Village Singer," then, depicts a solitary woman with no close friends who, although she is well aware of the prejudice against women by her community at large, chooses to single out for criticism only one perceived rival. This story introduces the alienation experienced by other women in the ensuing stories in the *New England Nun* collection and

adumbrates the ambivalent interactions between women in "A Gala Dress" and in "Sister Liddy."

"A Gala Dress" is one of the most innovative stories in *A New England Nun* collection. On the surface, this story presents a scenario familiar to much of Freeman's short fiction. Indeed, the spare existence of two elderly sisters who scrimp and struggle to maintain their pride in the face of their obvious poverty recalls Freeman's earlier short story "A Mistaken Charity," first published in 1887. Yet examining not just the Babcocks' plight, which seems to be the focus of "A Gala Dress," but also that of Matilda Jennings reveals how these economic issues tear at the fabric of their friendships.

"A Gala Dress" also contains the three-part paradigm mentioned earlier. First, Freeman spends three pages detailing the Babcock sisters' economic plight. By most standards, Elizabeth and Emily are poor. Their meals are meager, consisting mostly of bread and tea. Although they are poor in terms of income, they do not see themselves as such: they own their own house which grants them some status in the community. The sisters also have the "faint savor of gentility and aristocracy" in their family, as their father had been "college-educated and a doctor" (43).

Because they perceive themselves as genteel, they maintain the rituals of gentility. They serve their meager meals of bread and tea on china and with silver tableware.

Likewise, the Babcocks possess strong ideas about how they should appear in public. For social outings, they prefer to appear in black silk. As they possess but one black silk dress between them, they take turns wearing it in public. To prevent the community from knowing that they own only one "good dress," Emily trims the one black silk dress with lace when she wears it, and Elizabeth attaches black velvet when she does. In this way, they hide their "secret" of only one dress from the community.

Their concern over their own social status and their fear of being the object of community gossip not only requires them, in their eyes at least, to share one good black silk, but it also hampers their comfort at home. They guard their privacy vigilantly, especially those simple elements like food and clothing that signify class and privilege to the community. Ironically, they do enjoy their social outings: "They were more at ease abroad than at home, perhaps because there were not present so many doors which could be opened into their secrecy" (44).

Because of their dogged insistence on the rigid rules of social class despite their financial limitations, the sisters have an uneasy relationship with their friend and neighbor, Matilda Jennings. Essentially, Matilda Jennings is aware of the sisters' genteel affectations and tries to unseat their pretensions. Matilda's constant prying into their lives and her attempts to uncover the Babcocks' "secrets" make them

very competitive with her. Their irritation with her is evident in the story's second page when Elizabeth insists that Emily go to the Fourth of July picnic. She tells Emily that she must go to the picnic because "'I ain't goin' to have Matilda Jennings peekin' and pryin' an' tellin' things, if I know it'" (38). In fact, Matilda Jennings does do everything in her power to pry into the lives of the Babcock sisters. In one scene, for example, she barges into the Babcock home during meal time under the pretense of seeing if they were going to attend the picnic, hoping to discover what the sisters were eating. In this scene, the narrator uses quantitative language to describe Matilda's actions in this scene: "All the time her sharp and comprehensive gaze was on the tea-table. She counted the slices of bread, she measured the butter as she talked" (41). The scene is a comical one, for her intrusion so offends the sisters that Elizabeth literally pushes Matilda, whose eyes are still focused backward to their table, out of their kitchen and into the next room (41). Her scrutiny, of course, embarrasses the sisters, but Matilda's observance of the black dress mortifies them further: "'Oh, you've been fixin' your dress!" (42). Guessing that the sisters share the one dress, Matilda asks to see it but is rebuffed by Elizabeth.

At this point, the narrative provides a telling comparison between the Babcocks and Matilda Jennings. Their ancestry provides context for the different ways they live

their lives, although the women are equally poor. While the Babcocks' lineage has "the faint savor of gentility and aristocracy," Matilda's ancestors "had been humble . . . . She had come of wood-sawyers and garden-laborers. In their youth, when they had gone to school and played together, they had always realized their height above Matilda, and even old age and poverty and a certain friendliness could not do away with it" (43).

The way they eat their meals also differentiates the women. While the Babcocks have little to eat, they always have the proper accoutrements with their meals: a china teapot, china dishes, and silver teaspoons. Their preoccupation with wearing black silk to public events indicates as well their "notions of etiquette" (44). On the other hand, Matilda lives her life in a bare and plain way. Her meals are "solitary and substantial," composed of "bread and butter, cold potatoes, and pork and beans . . . . She had never, like them, known better days. She had never possessed any fine old muslins nor black silks in her life, but she had always eaten more" (43). While the story seems to set up the reader to sympathize with the sisters, these details about Matilda present her as a character also deserving of compassion.

Their mistrustful relationship intensifies the morning of the picnic when Matilda arrives to escort Emily. She comments on Emily's wearing the black silk to the picnic:

"'My! you ain't goin' to wear that black silk trailin' round in the woods, are you?'" Attempting both to deter Matilda's probing questions and to put down Matilda's dress, Elizabeth responds in kind with "'She's got to go lookin' decent" (44). Elizabeth's subtle insult concerning Matilda's old alpaca dress stings Matilda, who "all day long . . . manoeuvered to keep her patches and darns out of sight . . . and made many little flings at Emily's black silk" (45). Although the Babcocks do not necessarily have more than Matilda, they act as if they do, and these affectations incite Matilda's envy. Elizabeth's comment about owning one "decent" dress, a black silk, is a subtle reminder that Matilda does not own even that.

Matilda reveals the depth of her spite when, on their return from the picnic, she allows Emily to step on a nest of firecrackers, which results in the ruin of her dress: "Matilda had been taking the lead [as they walked home], but she suddenly stepped aside. Emily walked on unsuspectingly, holding up her precious black silk" (46). Matilda acts as if she does not know why Emily stepped into the fray and then feigns horror at the damage done to Emily's dress: "'My! ain't that a wicked shame! Jest look at all them holes, right in the flouncin', where it'll show!'"(46).

When Emily returns home, she is completely distraught and wails that Elizabeth can never go into public again: "'You can't never go without folks knowin.' Matilda Jennings

will tell'" (47). Naturally, the resourceful sisters immediately devise ways to mend the dress and disguise the rips. As their Aunt Elizabeth has recently died, Elizabeth, the aunt's namesake, decides to camoflauge the damage with a crape flounce which will distinguish her dress from Emily's version. While the maneuver stymies Matilda for the moment, soon the sisters receive a trunk of the deceased aunt's clothing, among which are two black silk dresses. This delights the sisters, and Emily gleefully notes that "'We--won't say--anything about this to anybody. We'll jest go together to meetin' next Sabbath, an' wear these black silks, *an' let Matilda Jennings see*'" (49). This has the intended effect on Elizabeth: "A gleam came into her dim blue eyes; she tightened her thin lips. *'Well, we will'*" (49). Although the sisters have had to live frugally to survive, their chief concern is not extra clothing; their one-upmanship of Matilda Jennings is.

The Babcock sisters' triumphant return to society together arouses much interest in their village. Matilda Jennings approaches them to discover the meaning of this dual appearance and tells the Babcocks that the community has long speculated why the two sisters were never seen out together: "It's been round consider'ble lately that you an' Em'ly didn't get along well, an' that was the reason you didn't go out more together" (50). This information startles and angers Elizabeth, who stands up and reveals their reason for

not going out together: "'You've been tryin' to find out things every way you could, an' now I'll tell you. You've drove me to it. We had just one decent dress between us, an' Em'ly an' me took turns wearin' it'" (51).

Interestingly, Elizabeth's confession, the subject of which Matilda has long since guessed, does not please Matilda. In fact, the information deflates her, and her dismay reflects in her countenance: "She should have been more jubilant than she was . . . . still she looked uneasy and subdued" (52). While the Babcocks have revealed their motives for disguising the dress, Matilda goes further and admits the source of her own envy: "'I s'pose I kinder begretched you that black silk . . . or I shouldn't have cared so much about findin' out. I never had a black silk myself, nor any of my folks that I ever heard of. I ain't got nothin' decent to wear anyway'" (52).

While the story's resolution seems to move toward the women's bonding, several elements in the story's final two pages forecasts a subtle current of rivalry that may continue between them. "A Gala Dress" takes an interesting narrative turn toward the end when the Babcocks, who now own two more black silk dresses, offer their other black silk to Matilda, who accepts it. This gesture seems to indicate the Babcocks' desire for amends. Michelle Clark explains, "Only when the number of black silk dresses increases can the three women stop their attempts to humiliate each other. Sufficient

material wealth brings an end to psychological conflict" (199). The Babcocks' role as giver, however, underscores their self-perceived role as superior in the relationship, which suggests that similar rivalry and envy may reemerge.

While much of the story seems to sympathize with the Babcocks' predicament, the narrator gives Matilda the story's last words. Just before she returns home, she confesses that she allowed Emily to step into the nest of firecrackers: "'Look here, said she, with a fine light struggling out of her old coarse face, 'I want to tell you--*I see them fire-crackers a-sizzlin' before Em'ly stepped in 'em*'" (53).

The description of Matilda's final confession elevates her almost to the level of the heroic. Rather than close "A Gala Dress" with a moment of bonding between these three women, Freeman chooses, then, to end the story in a rather startling manner. Closing with the description of Matilda indicates that the narrator most admires Matilda for admitting all of her failings of envy and spite. The Babcocks do not confess their pride. The story's resolution thus presents a sense of aporia in the text: the reader expects to sympathize with the Babcocks, but various elements in the story, from the description of Matilda's life to her final confession, disrupt that identification, pointing more to Matilda's strengths. Ultimately, this story indicates that the Babcocks have not rid themselves of their genteel affectations, and thus the dynamics of the women's

friendships have not changed, and it does not seem as if they will. "A Gala Dress" illustrates well that women's friendships will be fraught with envy when an unequal power relation exists between them; and, the text leaves the issue of women's reconciliation unresolved, suggesting Freeman's unwillingness or inability to delve deeper into such conflicts.

Unlike "A Gala Dress," "Sister Liddy" does not begin with a conversation intimating underlying conflict. Instead, this fifth story in the *New England Nun* collection begins with a description of the story's setting--the almshouse and its bleak surroundings. This work may echo Freeman's own background. As a young woman, she and her family members moved to Brattleboro, Vermont, in hopes of improving their economic livelihood, into a house situated next to the town's poorhouse (Westbrook 8). In this work the bleak narrative descriptions delimit the bleak lives of the almshouse residents, consistently referred to as "paupers" by the story's narrator:

> There were no trees near the almshouse; it stood in its bare, sandy lot, and there were no leaves or branches to cast shadows on its walls. It seemed like the folks whom it sheltered, out in the full glare of day, without any little kindly shade between itself and the dull, unfeeling stare of curiosity. (81)

After describing the physical setting, Freeman then intensifies the story's pathos by revealing that the building houses not only the village's impoverished but also its insane citizens: "[the almshouse] was so fine and costly that the village did not feel able to give its insane paupers separate support in a regular asylum; so they lived in the almshouse with the sane paupers, and there was a padded cell in case they waxed too violent" (87).

Although the almshouse shelters both women and men, Freeman's story focuses exclusively on its female inhabitants. Typical of her other work in the *New England Nun* collection, Freeman takes care to describe the women's lives, past and present. Early in the story, the narrator recounts the appearance of one young woman whose recent economic calamities have devastated her body and spirit:

> She was handsome, but she kept her mouth parted miserably, and there were ghostly white streaks around it and her nostrils. She never spoke. Her pretty black hair was rough, and her dress sagged at the neck. She had been living out at a large farm, and had overworked. She had no friends or relatives to take her in; so she had come to the almshouse to rest and try to recover . . . . She had a lover, but he had not been to see her since she came to the almshouse, six weeks before; she

> wept most of the time over that and her physical misery. (82-83)

Despite their shared misery, these impoverished women develop bitter rivalries among them. This friction seems to fester primarily because of their shared economic misery. Interestingly, when there is work to be done--cooking and cleaning--the women work cooperatively, but during their spare time, they lapse into petty bickering.

The rest of the story is devoted to the women's recounting of their pride in their past possessions. As Elbert notes, Freeman's characters often derive self-esteem from a prized possession or some other token that is tied to feminine ladyhood. The irony here is that these prized possessions are long gone, if they ever existed. With no present to console them or to take pride in, they rely on discussing past glories to maintain or advance their status in their group. Comparing clothes to knick-knacks, the almshouse women vie for an esteemed position in their group by competitively discussing who once had more possessions than her peers:

> Now they had nothing, but at one time or another they had had something over which to plume themselves and feel that precious pride of possession. Their present was to them a state of simple existence, they regarded their future with a vague resignation; they were none of them thinkers

> . . . . In their pasts alone they took real comfort, and they kept, as it were, feeling of them to see if they were not still warm with life. (92)

Of all the women, only Polly Moss has not participated in "these inventories and comparing of notes" because

> She . . . had never had anything in which to take pride. She had always been deformed and poor and friendless. She had worked for scanty pay as long as she was able, and had then drifted and struck on the almshouse, where she had grown old. She had not even a right to the charity of this particular village: this was merely the place where her working powers had failed her. (92)

Alone and "friendless," Polly desires to belong in some way to this cruel coterie, and the only way she can is if she indulges in similar comparisons. Furthermore, the other women subtly engage in making Polly feel inferior: "When a new item of past property was given, there was always a side-glance in Polly's direction" (93). In their eyes, her perpetual poverty diminishes her. Polly seeks, then, some sort of respite from this.

To gain some foothold in this community, a kind of voice, Polly falsifies a past for herself, focused entirely on her fictional sister Liddy's incredible life. Interestingly, Polly does not create such a fantastic past life for herself, probably realizing that the other women

would never believe it. Instead, Polly spends days mesmerizing her neighbors about Liddy. Polly launches into a scrupulous description of her sister, recalling her looks, her clothes, her possessions, and her family. According to Polly, Liddy was "jest as fair as a lily" (94). When Liddy married "she had a whole chistful of clothes, real fine cotton cloth"; after marrying, Liddy "lived in Bostown, an' she had a great big house with a parlor an' settin'-room . . . . Liddy's husband, he thought everythin' of her . . . . Liddy she had the beautifulest baby you ever see" (95). Polly's first mention of her fictional sister Liddy's fantastic and enviable existence occurs after one of the other women's discussion. Polly's stories of Liddy, who figures as some nineteenth-century ideal of womanhood, stuns the other women. Reichardt writes that

> Polly's beautiful, talented, but imaginary sister represents for her all she is not, the fulfillment of her frustrated, limited self . . . . She has found that, by postulating herself as sister to a woman who is charming, talented, and wealthy, she is able to gain the admiration and respect of her women friends and to rest secure in a new-found identity. (*Web* 114)

While the other women remain slightly incredulous as to the truth of Liddy's existence and can not make up their minds whether to believe or disbelieve Polly, they are riveted by

Polly's stories of Liddy: "Every day Polly Moss was questioned and crossexamined concerning her sister Liddy" (96). Thus, the women's rapt attention grants Polly meager status in their group.

Unfortunately, Polly dies of pneumonia two weeks after her first mention of Liddy. Wanting to absolve herself of her lie, she calls the other women to her deathbed. Acknowledging her "wickedness," Polly tells them that

> it's dretful hard sometimes to keep holt of [God], an' not look anywheres else, when you see folks a-clawin' an' gettin' other things, an' actin' as if they was wuth havin'. . . . I used to feel dretful bad an' wicked when I heered you all talkin' 'bout things you'd had, an' I hadn't never had nothin,' so . . . . I never had any sister Liddy. (98)

These penitent words end Freeman's story, with no indication of what the other women's reactions are. Instead, what Freeman seems more interested in capturing are the psychological effects of poverty on women's relationships. Polly's severely deprived background has rendered her unacceptable according to the other paupers' standards, and in her own eyes, she feels "dretful wicked" for never possessing economic respectability. Although the women have no status in the larger community of their village because of their meager financial positions, they do strive for some foothold in the immediate community of the almshouse, even if

that foothold is based on some imaginary better life. The story's abrupt ending suggests that Freeman's story was able only to present the psychological battles between the women; the abyss of despair that Freeman uncovers in this story, suggested by Polly and her actions, was perhaps too complex for Freeman to explore further in the medium of the short story. "Sister Liddy"'s truncated ending suggests, however, that Freeman was on the verge of presenting a radical critique of the connection of gender and economics but was unable in this venue to explore the issue further.

The next two stories, "A Stolen Christmas" and "A Church Mouse," move away from the open and somewhat undecipherable quality found in the endings of "A Village Singer," "A Gala Dress," and "A Sister Liddy." "A Stolen Christmas," however, does contain the same narrative formula found in the three prior stories. "A Stolen Christmas" begins with the conflict between women and then reveals Marg'ret Poole's economic background.

This work is particularly interesting when compared with "A Gala Dress." The latter provides the perspective of two proud neighbors who are goaded by their poorer neighbor into admitting their feigned wealth; however, "A Stolen Christmas" reverses the situation and presents the viewpoint from the poorer neighbor, Marg'ret Poole, who resents her relatively wealthier neighbor, Mrs. Ely, who, like the Babcocks, feels herself superior to her poorer counterpart. Neither Matilda

Jennings nor Marg'ret Poole has ever had as much as her respective neighbors. These differences are evident in everything from the furnishings in their homes to the clothes on their backs. The Babcock sisters and Mrs. Ely wear wool, while Matilda Jennings and Marg'ret Poole wear alpaca and calico, respectively.

As in several of Freeman's holiday stories, most of which were commissioned by editors at *Harper's*, the spirit of the season is instead replaced with spite. According to Kendrick, Freeman "knew she had to consider the public's reading tastes" in order to enjoy some degree of financial success, and "Thus it becomes clear why holiday stories figure so prominently in her canon" (22-3). "A Stolen Christmas" begins with the implication of conflict, which is first insinuated by Mrs. Luther Ely, as she speaks to Marg'ret Poole: "'I don't suppose you air goin' to do much Christmas over to your house.'" The story's first page outlines Mrs. Ely's condescending attitude to her less fortunate neighbor. The text describes Mrs. Ely's face as having a "sweet hypocritical smile on her little thin red mouth'" when she speaks (321). Although her eyes are described as "staring as innocently as a baby's," they have a "certain hardness in them" (321). Freeman takes great pains to describe these two women, in essence comparing them as she did the Babcocks and Matilda Jennings in "A Gala Dress."

The social differences between the women are immediately evident in their names. One woman is called Mrs. Luther Ely, while Marg'ret Poole's name is not prefaced with a Mrs., even though she was once married, and her name is not even spelled out as Margaret but, instead, is written in the colloquial form of "Marg'ret." Freeman's naming of these characters thus presents clear markers of social indicators to her readers.

In addition to the characters' different names, the narrator spends several pages detailing additional differences between the two women. The narrator begins with the disparity in household furnishings. Mrs. Ely describes her new curtains as "elegant Nottingham-lace draperies" tied "with bows of red ribbon" (322). As Mrs. Ely describes her dissatisfaction with her previous white cotton curtains, Marg'ret "thought of her green paper ones" (322). Clearly, new curtains would be a luxury for her, and she has never owned cloth curtains for her windows. Mrs. Ely's comments make Marg'ret quite unhappy with her own situation and spark her feelings of dislike for the other woman, although she feels guilty for it: "she at once admired and despised her; and this admiration of one whom she despised made her angry with herself and ashamed" (322). Marg'ret cannot help but compare her own situation to Mrs. Ely's; as a result, she feels envious:

> Mrs. Luther Ely had been all her life the one notch higher, which had seemed almost attainable. In that opposite house there was only one carpet; Marg'ret might have hoped for one carpet. Mrs. Ely's son-in-law earned a comfortable living for his family; Marg'ret's might have done that. Worst of all, each woman had one daughter, and Marg'ret's had died. (327)

If Mrs. Ely's newest acquisition does not make her feel inadequate enough, Marg'ret then begins to compare her clothes with Mrs. Ely's. Mrs. Ely wears "a lace cap adorned with purple ribbons," and her gown is made of black wool. Ultimately, Marg'ret grows dissatisfied with her own "chocolate calico" (323), just as Matilda Jennings was dissatisfied with her alpaca dress.

With these details of economic envy in place, Freeman continues to intensify Marg'ret's insecurity by focusing on the Christmas season and her many pressing obligations. Unlike Mrs. Ely, who lives with a daughter and son-in-law who support her, Marg'ret lives alone with her three grandchildren. After the death of her daughter, her son-in-law moved to a distant city to try and earn money. So far, he has been unable to send more than a few dollars sporadically to help with his children's support. The "burden of their support had come upon her" (326).

To increase her income, Marg'ret does an assortment of odd jobs, including some tailoring. Because her method of work is outdated (eclipsed by manufactured clothes), "she could only pick up a few cents at a time" (326). The narrator describes her as "old and poor" and the sole supporter of "three helpless children" (327). Clearly, the narrator sympathizes with her, as she seems to admire Marg'ret's struggle to provide for her three grandchildren, unlike the narrator's description of Mrs. Ely as "hypocritical" or "smirking" (321). However, Freeman is not as intent on showing Marg'ret's daily struggle as she is in depicting Marg'ret's reactions to Mrs. Ely's gloating.

Marg'ret Poole's poverty is heightened by the imminent holiday season and by Mrs. Ely's newly acquired household possessions, both of which intensify Marg'ret's sense of her poverty. Mrs. Ely's recent purchases incite Marg'ret's sense of unfairness, and she vows to get Christmas gifts for her grandchildren. After days of window shopping, Marg'ret spies a parcel in the village store and steals it. For awhile, she justifies her actions to herself until she receives news that her son-in-law has obtained a better job and will be sending her twenty dollars monthly. As soon as she hears of her reversal of fortune, Marg'ret admits to herself that "'I've--*stole*'" (331).

Soon after, Mrs. Ely's house catches fire and Marg'ret runs to warn the family of their burning house. Despite her

earlier resentment of Mrs. Ely's possessions, Marg'ret is the one to rush in to the burning house to save the curtains and carpet until spectators prevent her.

Prompted by her recent good fortune, Marg'ret buys Mrs. Ely new Nottingham-lace curtains. Her recent windfall and Mrs. Ely's misfortune have a moralizing effect on her: "'Here I've been talkin' and worryin' about gettin' up a higher notch . . . an' kind of despisin' Mis' Ely when I see her on one. Mis' Ely wouldn't have stole. I ain't nothin' 'side of her now, an' I never can be'" (335). Like Matilda Jennings, Marg'ret feels badly when confronted with her actions and her envy. The above passage reveals that, even when witnessing Mrs. Ely's loss, Marg'ret feels most comfortable when she has someone to admire, no matter how negative a form that admiration might take. Marg'ret can be emotionally generous when she is no longer in a position of envy. The story, oddly enough, concludes, focussing on the importance of self-sacrifice and maintaining friendships.

Like "A Village Singer" and "Sister Liddy," "A Church Mouse" is a rich story in terms of its subtle layers of conflict and calls to mind other American works that depict the ungenerous behavior of Christians to marginalized persons, like that of the nameless black man in Langston Hughes' "On the Road." Unique among regionalist works for its depiction of an elderly homeless woman, "A Church Mouse" presents the dilemma of Hetty Fifield, an aging woman who has

no place to live. Although she is willing to work for room and board, Hetty is unable to find anyone willing to take her in, partly because of her strong sense of self. Hetty's firm need to assert herself in the face of public disapproval stands in contrast to the women characters in the earlier stories, who are more passive.

The story itself, like many works in the *New England Nun* collection, begins in the middle of a conversation, a dialogue that indicates tension. In this case, the opening exchange foregrounds gender conflict: "'I never heard of a woman's bein' saxton'" (407). This first line fuels the conflict in the rest of the story. Initially, the conflict is between Hetty and the townsmen who oppose her desire to be church sexton and move into the church itself. Speaking to Deacon Caleb Gale, she outlines her reasonable stance:

> I don't see why they shouldn't have women saxtons as well as men saxtons . . . . Men git in a good many places where they don't belong, an' where they set as awkward as a cow on a hen-roost, jest because they push ahead of women . . . . But there ain't no reason that I can see . . . why a woman shouldn't be saxton. (407)

Although the story critiques the inequity and the tenacity of gender roles in this remote nineteenth-century village, "A Church Mouse" is also important for its depiction of women's interactions.

While a single elderly woman might be particularly susceptible to hardship, the village townspeople seem particularly unfeeling toward Hetty. They watch her with interest but without offering to help as she moves her things into the church. When Hetty enlists a young boy to help her move her stove, his mother offers a multitude of excuses to prevent her son from helping Hetty. It is as if Hetty's needy state induces others to distance themselves from her. As self-proclaimed church sexton, Hetty undertakes those duties previously prescribed to male sextons. Her tenure as sexton proceeds for three months until she completely domesticates the church sanctuary with her "worsted-work" and other housekeeping duties. But when she cooks a meal of turnips and cabbage and when the aromas permeate the church sanctuary, its members are indignant. Caleb Gale consults the other deacons about what to do. Tellingly, he had not noticed the smells "until his wife nudged him and mentioned it" (418). The men were about to overlook it, until prompted by their wives to take action.

When Hetty sequesters herself in the church sanctuary and locks out the townspeople who want to move her, Caleb Gale brings his wife into the conflict. At first, judging by her earlier nudge, she seems to agree with the men's decisions of what is best for Hetty: "She turned again quite fiercely, and began beating the door. 'Hetty!' she called; 'Hetty, Hetty Fifield! Let me in! What have you locked

this door for?'" (421). A crowd begins to gather as the men try out an odd assortment of keys to unlock the church door. This scene of gathering spectators is reminiscent of "The Revolt of 'Mother'" when the interested villagers gather to see Adoniram's reaction to his wife Sarah's actions of moving her family into the barn. In "Revolt," however, the spectators do not become involved as they do in "A Church Mouse." The narrator describes the number of women who gather to watch the spectacle besides Caleb Gale's wife and daughter: "The other selectmen's wives toiled eagerly up the hill, with a young daughter of one of them speeding on ahead. Then the two young girls stood close to each other and watched the proceedings" (422). The men soon opt for violent entry into Hetty's fortress, as one man departs to look for a crowbar. At this point the attending women wrest control of the scene, now realizing the absurdity of the unfolding events.

At this point in the narrative, the women characters draw together in a symbolic show of support for Hetty, while the male characters all but disappear from the text. Two young girls who have wandered upon the scene have "their arms around each other under their shawls," as if to comfort each other and to join sympathetically with Hetty (423). Like Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, who gather in Mrs. Wright's kitchen to find evidence but ultimately draw together because of the men's domineering

posturing, the women in Freeman's story eventually bond together to offer their support to Hetty. For instance, Mrs. Gale admonishes her husband about breaking down the church door. When Hetty peeps out of a gallery window to speak, Mrs. Gale calls out, "'Say all you want to, Hetty, an' don't be afraid'" (424). After Hetty's speech and Mrs. Gale's supportive rejoinder, "'Of course you can stay in the meetin'-house'" (424), the male characters vanish from the story, leaving only the women characters to sort out Hetty's predicament. Fienberg suggests that the women come to Hetty's defense because of her "ability to make them understand and assert the claim of their own daily lives . . . . Hetty's most creative act in the story is, finally, her ability to establish solidarity among the townswomen out of their isolation and private embarrassment" (501). Although the men appear to be the decision-makers in the story's beginning, they are often presented, from Sammy to Caleb, as diffident and unsure. The women in this story act powerfully and decisively, and, ultimately, use their power and influence for good, at least in Hetty's situation. The next morning is Christmas, and the story ends with Hetty awaiting a gift of Christmas supper from Mrs. Gale.

Freeman's story is a simple uplifting tale but reveals much about Freeman's belief in the power of women's conflict and mediation. While the story does not offer any hope for actual social change--it is never indicated that Hetty's

village ever builds a poor house--what is instead reiterated is the position of Hetty and the other women of her community within this male-dominated society. In the beginning of the story, Hetty symbolizes to the women of the town the all too real possibility that they, too, may grow old, friendless, and destitute. Thus, they distance themselves from her, trying to ignore her plight. As such, the women side with the male characters, even pointing out Hetty's actions to the deacons, which also distances them further from Hetty. Finally, in the story's climax with Hetty locked in the church, the women almost inexplicably side with Hetty. Realistically, they might not have had much power, yet Freeman grants them power in her narrative, as the men with their attendant authority fade to the textual margins while the women wrest control of the situation and maintain it for the rest of the story. Ultimately, like the previously discussed stories, "A Church Mouse" shows the powerful sway of gender ideology and economics in women's relationships.

Throughout *A New England Nun*'s collection of stories, Freeman presents a variety of responses to the conflicts in women's friendships. The sequence of these five stories, beginning with "A Village Singer," "A Gala Dress," "Sister Liddy," and ending with "A Stolen Christmas" and "A Church Mouse," reveals an interesting shift in the way Freeman's women characters respond to economic-based conflict in their relationships. The first three stories provide the most

ambivalent, and at times the most puzzling, moments between women friends. In these works, a character may offer a gesture of reconciliation, only to wrest it away in anger at the last moment. The main characters in these three works seem most unaware of their own economic and ideological predicaments. After all, it is Candace who is most aware of the ageist and sexist practices of her community. Her critique, however, goes just so far, as she chooses to sabotage the work of her rival, rather than lash out at the community at large. The women characters in "A Gala Dress" and "Sister Liddy" are likewise embroiled in their predicaments and remain unable to see their limitations as symptomatic of their class position.

The two stories in Freeman's *New England Nun* collection that envision a different kind of response to economic competition between women are "A Stolen Christmas" and "A Church Mouse." In both of these works, the characters realize the limitations of their actions, gain a degree of critical consciousness, and work to change their behaviors. Marg'ret in "A Stolen Christmas" realizes that her jealousy has incited her to steal; she then opts for generosity and compassion as a response to Mrs. Ely's misfortune. In "A Church Mouse," the other women in Hetty's village begin to feel compassion for Hetty's situation only after they have demeaned and humiliated her and when they recognize the possibility of their own future misfortunes mirrored in her

predicament. Their compassion for her causes them to unite behind her in a show of solidarity.

Freeman's stories are important for what they show us about the complexity of women's relationships under economic adversity. While the characters in the *New England Nun* collection at times appear stymied by the grim situations they present, their stories provide an important transition to later works like Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*. At the time Freeman was writing her short fiction, there was no public discussion in America of women's roles and class conflict, though her stories serve in part to suggest the need for such a discussion. Later writers like Edith Wharton were able to delineate with more complexity the powerful effect of economics on women's relationships, while Charlotte Perkins Gilman offered a full-fledged solution to the contemporary problems of women.

Chapter Four:
"the cruelty of women to their kind":
Lily Bart and Friendship in
Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*

If Freeman's short fiction underscores her difficulties reconciling economic competition in women's relationships with idealized feminine roles and behavior and if such narrative conflicts resulted in rather sentimental endings, the fact was not lost on Edith Wharton. In her autobiography *A Backward Glance,* Wharton, reflecting on her own writerly interest in New England, remarks that she had desired "to draw life as it really was in the derelict mountain villages of New England . . . utterly unlike that seen through the rose-coloured spectacles of my predecessors, Mary Wilkins and Sarah Orne Jewett" (293). Unfortunately, Wharton said little else on Freeman, but her fiction does seem to respond to what seems to be Freeman's idealizing New Englanders and her inability to "follow through" with a truly incisive social critique. In sharp contrast to Freeman's fiction, Edith Wharton's literary work shows remarkable adroitness in depicting and sustaining maliciousness between her women characters. Further, Wharton's fictional endings rarely conclude in apology or a return to good behavior, as do many of Freeman's. Works like "Roman Fever," for example, show

just the opposite: the woman who in the end finds satisfaction revealing first hand her betrayal to her friend.

Of all of Edith Wharton's novels, novellas, and short stories, though, *The House of Mirth* depicts most harshly women's treatment of each other in the context of "friendship." Essentially homeless and without close family connections, Lily Bart, an impoverished woman from the upper classes, tries desperately to maintain her accustomed style of living and must do so at the expense and pleasure of her female friends. Home, that domestic sphere sacred to nineteenth-century women as the site of true womanhood, is a tenuous hope for Lily because of her ever-worsening financial situation in the novel. Lily relies heavily on her friends to provide her with lodging and a social life. As such, home and friendship are inextricably bound together for her. Lily's unsuccessful pursuit of her own place in her society delineates and amplifies the ideological gulfs that exist in her relationships with other women: with Gerty Farish, with Bertha Dorset, and with Judy Trenor. Ultimately, Lily's financial dilemma coupled with her tendency to step outside acceptable social boundaries instigates jealousies and disastrous manipulations among Lily's alleged friends. The novel shows Lily's immersion in a capitalist upper class, as well as her struggle to break free and vindicate herself at the end. Whereas the women characters in Freeman's *A New England Nun* arrive at uneasy truces that preserve their

friendships, Wharton's novel finely dissects the largely negative and competitive relationships between women in the capitalist upper class of American society.

During the 1890s when Mary Wilkins Freeman was writing her most acclaimed fiction, Wharton was just beginning her literary career between "bouts of acute depression" (Ammons, "Preface" vii). Wharton was not to begin work on *The House of Mirth* until September of 1903, developing the ideas she had gathered from her *donnee* book in a section called "A Moment's Ornament," presumbably the novel's original title (Benstock, *Gifts* 139). Although she devoted her mornings to writing, her progress was slowed by other duties: husband Teddy's various illnesses, travel, and other writing (Lewis 150-51). In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton writes that after completing *The Valley of Decision* in 1902, she began to contemplate writing a "novel of contemporary life in New York" (205). Her chief problem, she relates, "was how to extract . . . the typical human significance" from the topic. She concludes as follows:

> The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart. (207)

Upon nearing the novel's completion, Wharton contracted with Scriber's to serialize the novel. In return, Scriber's paid

Wharton $5000 up front (Lewis 151). On October 14, 1905 *The House of Mirth* was published--in a print run of 40,000 first editions (150). By early 1906, *The House of Mirth* had become a bestseller (151). In a letter to Charles Scribner on November 11, 1905, Wharton expresses her pleasure at the novel's success: "It is a very beautiful thought to me that 80,000 people should want to read "The House of Mirth," and if the number should exceed 100,000 I fear my pleasure would exceed the bounds of decency" (Lewis, *Letters* 95).

As was expected,the novel's critical reception was generally good. Initial reviews showed *The House of Mirth* garnered the approval of Hamlin Garland, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, S. Weir Mitchell, and Henry James (Lewis 152-53). *The Saturday Review* offered praise for Wharton and hailed her characterization of Lily as one "that will haunt the imagination of the reader and live in the memory," and it called *The House of Mirth* "one of the few novels which can claim to rank as literature" (130). In like fashion, the *Outlook* review praised Wharton for her adherence to realism and for not bowing to the "optimistic mood which is supposed to dominate American readers, and no evasion of the inexorable logic of life," calling the novel a work "of integrity of insight and workmanship" (112).

Yet, *The House of Mirth* generated negative press as well. Lewis notes that Wharton was "attacked for having provided a warning about modern America rather than hope"

(154). The *Independent* advised that Wharton should have devised a "means of escape for her victims" and warned that Wharton's novel "will not last, because it is simply the fashionable drawing of ephemeral types and still more ephemeral sentiments" (110). Mary Moss, in the *Atlantic Monthly*, after praising Wharton's "well-conceived, brilliantly executed" plot, denounced its "shallowness" and says, "At best, Lily can only inspire interest and curiosity. You see, you understand, and you ratify, but unfortunately, you do not greatly care" (128). Most of the criticism directed at the novel denounced *The House of Mirth* as a novel of manners depicting a frivolous class, and, so, undeserving of critical attention.

While Wharton's literary reputation was solidified by the publication of *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Reef* (1912), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), her reputation suffered a decline in the 1930s. This negative reaction was due in part to a backlash against her subject matter, the upper echelons of society, and to the perception that she was a second-rate Henry James. As Shari Benstock notes in "A Critical History of *The House of Mirth*," Wharton's social fictions were "judged as mere 'curiosities' --nostalgic reminiscenses . . . of a bygone age rather than condemnation of modern mores" (315). Like Freeman's work, Wharton's fiction was not overtly political enough to merit critical attention after the 1920s.

However, in 1938, a year after Wharton's death in France, Edmund Wilson sought to resuscitate Wharton's fading reputation in his essay "Justice to Edith Wharton," first published in *The New Republic* and later collected in *The Wound and the Bow*. In this pivotal essay, Wilson accentuates the incisive social critique that Wharton introduced in fiction like *The House of Mirth*. Wilson explains that upon the publication of *The House of Mirth*, Wharton emerged as a "passionate social prophet" (160). His attempt to spotlight Wharton's career paved the way for later critics Diana Trilling and Blake Nevius, who also worked to further Wharton's importance.

Diana Trilling's 1947 article entitled "*The House of Mirth* Revisited" calls for Wharton's reinstatement in "the main stream of literature" (103). Trilling praised the novel as "one of the most telling indictments of a social system based on the chance distribution of wealth, and therefore of social privilege, that has ever been put on paper" (106). First published in *Harper's Bazaar*, Trilling's article critiqued the novel's illustration of social and class structures and focused on women's relations to one another. It was highly influential in generating later critical interest.

Some six years later in 1953, Blake Nevius provided the first important book-length study of Wharton's fiction, *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction*. His major work took up

Wilson's call to reassess Wharton's fiction and pointed to the reasons for her disappearance in the academy.

Nearly twenty years later, Wharton studies were boosted by the publication of R.W.B. Lewis's 1975 *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, now considered the standard biography. Lewis's work did much to reanimate interest in Wharton studies. His work helped to shatter the prevailing notions of Wharton as a second-rate Henry James and established her as a diversely talented and brilliant writer. Subsequent biographies have taken up where Lewis left off. For instance, Cynthia Griffin Wolff's psychological biography, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*, appeared in 1977 and focuses on Wharton's dogged commitment to her art despite the emotional and social difficulties in her life. 1n 1994, Shari Benstock's *No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton* appeared. Benstock's biography, like Lewis's and Wolff's, examines the oppressive familial and social boundaries Wharton traversed to write and to fashion her own life.

Critical interest in *The House of Mirth* has flourished since the 1970s and more than a half dozen articles have focused on women's relationships in the novel. Judith Fetterly's "'The Temptation to be a Beautiful Object': Double Standard and Double Bind in *The House of Mirth*" (1977) examines the novel as a "powerful denunciation of patriarchal culture" (200). In critiquing the damaging effect of this culture on Lily, Fetterly points out, though briefly, the

resulting effect on women's relationships with one another, noting that "relationships between 'beautiful objects' are hostile and competitive rather than supportive" (203).

Cathy Davidson takes up a similar argument in "Kept Women in *The House of Mirth*," published in 1979. Davidson discusses the double standard that operates between married and single women in the novel; like Fetterly, Davidson notes that married women's behavior are granted more elasticity than single women's. Because of this, Davidson concludes, true friendship between women is difficult: "A society that expects women to compete against one another for a very few positions of prestige cannot encourage friendship, trust, and mutual sharing among women. Instead, jealousy must govern their relationship with one another" (11). Davidson's article offers many such valuable insights into the workings of women's relationships in the novel.

One of the most valuable book-length studies to arise from discussion of Wharton's women characters is Elizabeth Ammons's *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* (1980). Ammons posits that Wharton was at odds with American optimism about women's progress in the late nineteenth century and that her fiction was the result of her "argument" with American society. Like Fetterly and Davidson, Ammons focuses on women's relationships in her chapter on *The House of Mirth*. She observes that "relationships between women in this novel . . . are frequently hostile. Forbidden to

aggress on each other directly, or aggress on men at all, women prey on each other" (39).

Two years later, Carol Wershoven published *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton.* Wershoven examines the notion of the female intruder/interloper in Wharton's fiction, whose presence, whose sense of being "outside" society in some way, causes other characters to reexamine their own position in society. Wershoven's work contains a helpful discussion of *The House of Mirth,* particularly in her analysis of Lily's encounters with Judy Trenor and Bertha Dorset.

Elaine Showalter's "Death of the Lady (Novelist): Wharton's *The House of Mirth,*" first published in 1985 in *Representations* and later included in *Sister's Choice,* establishes *The House of Mirth* as an important text at the turn of the century for its depiction of women caught between a "homosocial women's culture" and "modernism," with Lily "stranded between these two worlds of female experience" (86). Showalter also declares *The House of Mirth* as the novel that signifies Wharton's break with the tradition of wome's homosocial culture.

In 1990, Mary Papke's study, *Verging on the Abyss: The Social Fiction of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton,* emerged as a useful and important materialist-feminist text for studying the works of both Chopin and Wharton as social critics and

prophets at the turn of the century. Papke highlights the "social world of Wharton's novels" as

> a world wherein the old order is giving way to the new, one in which women have gained little and lost much despite the emergence of seemingly progressive social theories and practices. (103)

Papke continues to say that the social relations in Wharton's novel, particularly the "social use of prescribed roles of women," figure significantly as "a thermometer by which to measure the heat of the social battle and the changes in social consciousness" (104).

In 1990, Susan Goodman published *Edith Wharton's Women: Friends and Rivals*, the first book length work to examine solely the kinds of women's friendships in Wharton's work. Goodman posits her argument counter to that of previous critics like Ammons and Wershoven, who tend to see "women in isolation or as primarily competitive" (3). Goodman primarily examines the positive bonds between women in Wharton's fiction. Her volume is the most thorough work to date on women's friendships in Wharton's writing; much, however, remains to be said.

Gloria Erlich's provocative study, *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton* (1992), examines the connection between the "maternal deprivation" in Wharton's life and her writing, paying particular attention to the depiction of

mother/daughter dynamics in Wharton's fiction (15). Ehrich provides an interesting discussion of Lily's lack of home in *The House of Mirth*.

Discussion of women's relationships in *The House of Mirth* generally falls, then, into two groups. Critics like Cathy W. Davidson and Elizabeth Ammons persuasively argue how women's separation from men and their own relative powerlessness within the larger economy instigate their antagonisms. Yet Susan Goodman has described the ways in which women nevertheless "connect" or desire such connections with other women in the novel.

Women's friendships in the novel range between these two poles of behavior. Two critics, Mary Papke and Elaine Showalter, both see *The House of Mirth* as a very complex social text that skillfully interrogates the conflicting social mores confronting women at the turn of the century. Mary Papke argues that Lily, "born into a genteel society" and raised "with its ideology of true womanhood," is nevertheless caught in a social world that defines her as a beautiful object to be bought and sold (118). In her discussion, Showalter describes Lily as

> stranded between two worlds of female experience: the intense female friendships and mother-daughter bonds characteristic of nineteenth-century American women's culture, and the dissolution of these single-sex relationships in the interests of more

> intimate friendships between women and men that was part of the gender crisis at the turn of the century. (86-87)

Showalter's and Papke's arguments provide a context for understanding the nature of women's friendship, although their discussion does not delve further into the issue. (Papke spends part of her discussion *on The House of Mirth*, and the rest on Wharton's other novels; Showalter focuses primarily on Lily's relationship with Lawrence Selden). Showalter's discussion does elaborate how Lily is "stranded" between the desire for the stability and security of female friendship and faced with the reality of women's friendships as reflecting the competition and vitriol of the marketplace. This chapter, then, will discuss how Lily's relationships with her female friends illuminate the ideological shift in gender at the turn of the century. This section will develop in greater detail the insights of Papke and Showalter, highlighting the relations between women in their changing society.

As Wharton wrote in *A Backward Glance*, Lily Bart's struggles take on tragic "significance" as we observe her slow destruction by a "frivolous society" (207). Throughout the novel, Lily encounters many different kinds of women from a range of social positions: a new woman like Gerty Farish, a divorcee like Carry Fisher, wealthy society women like Judy Trenor and Bertha Dorset, social climbers like Mrs.

Wellington Bry and Norma Hatch, and a working-class woman like Nettie Struther. Lily's interactions with all of these different kinds of women show what kinds of alliances between women are possible and which are impossible. As a novel of manners, *The House of Mirth* is important for what it shows readers about the intricacies of friendships in the world of Lily Bart.

While some of the texts that I have discussed previously--Alcott's *Work* and Freeman's *A New England Nun*--show women's relationships as essentially homosocial in nature but as deeply ambivalent when they enter the public sphere, *The House of Mirth* depicts more antagonisms and shows that in the late nineteenth century, the homosocial world of women as a cultural phenomenon was quickly disappearing and that women's friendships in Lily Bart's class could not be divorced from the public sphere of commerce. Despite the fact that Lily associates with a class of women who are commodified and are not "true women," she does long for some of the accouterments of domesticity. Home, the sphere sacred to the true woman, is non-existent for Lily. She spends much of the novel in search of one. Several times in the novel she longs for friendship and home and equates them together.

If ever there were a character in American literature in need of a friend, it is Lily Bart, a woman reliant on other women for her livelihood throughout the course of the novel. Dependent on her miserly Aunt Peniston for her living

expenses, Lily is equally dependent on the women in her social circle who invite her to visit them and travel with them so that she can maintain her accustomed style of living and, she hopes, enable her to snare a husband.

Thorstein Veblen's important study, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*, published in 1899 and comtemporaneous with *The House of Mirth*, provides a sound analysis of the world Lily inhabits:

> In any community where goods are held in severalty it is necessary . . . that an individual should possess as large a portion of goods as others with whom he is accustomed to class himself. (31)

As a member of the leisure class, Lily must maintain a semblance of that style of living until she can find a husband who can provide for her. Robert Shulman echoes Veblen's analysis of the leisure class and points out that "the entire women's upper-class social world [in *The House of Mirth*] is a mirror image of the men's financial world that provides the money to support it. In both versions, money is basic" (275). Ultimately, the personal relationships in the novel are dictated by the system of exchange and the drive for profit.

The House of Mirth begins with Lily in transition. The novel's opening chapter finds her on her way to visit the Trenors at Bellomont, and her ensuing discussion with her sometime suitor Lawrence Selden focuses on friendship. We

see that from the beginning of the novel, for Lily, home and friendship are inextricably linked. As Lily confides to Selden, she has neither, and as they converse in his apartment, she tells him that she is very much in need of friendship:

> You don't know how much I need such a friend . . . . And the other women--my best friends--well, they use me and abuse me; but they don't care a straw what happens to me. I've been about too long--people are getting tired of me; they are beginning to say I ought to marry. (9-10)

Because of her lack of family and home, Lily relies greatly on her friends to house her and make her visible in their social world. Such relationships have their drawbacks, however, because such arrangements encourage Lily to submit to various tiresome duties. For instance, early in Chapter Four, Judy Trenor, Lily's hostess and good friend, calls upon her to do some paperwork for her, send invitations, and other "social drudgery," as Lily views it (33). Such expected duties remind Lily of her "dependence" on her women friends. As she is not on an equal footing with Judy Trenor and because she is single and reliant on her friends, such activities are expected of her (34).

Throughout the novel, the language used to describe its characters, particularly its women characters, and the friendships between women take on increasing overtones of

competition and alienation, sure markers of capitalism. For example, Judy Trenor is described as, for the most part, washed-out and without interests except for her rivalries with other women of her class: "She knew no more personal emotion than that of hatred for the woman who presumed to give bigger dinners or have more amusing house-parties than herself" (34). If a woman does not threaten her social standing, as Lily does not, Judy Trenor exhibits "unscrupulous good nature toward the rest of her sex" (34). Because Lily recognizes that, she classifies Judy Trenor as "the woman who was least likely to "'go back on her'" (34).

One of Lily's chief blunders in the novel is, however, her misreading of her own friends and her trust in those who least deserve it. Because she knows her economic position does not threaten Judy Trenor, Lily feels assured that Judy will never betray her. Throughout the novel, though, Lily will misread social cues, misstep her bounds, and incur the vitriol of her "friends."

Our first glimpse of Lily at "work" in her social world is her excursion to Bellomont, the Trenors' estate. In this scene and throughout the rest of the novel, we see the upper-class society in which Lily moves and, most importantly, the difficulty of sustaining friendships in that competitive world. As Robert Shulman notes, in Lily's class, "The women do support each other to an extent--within limits they help Lily in the marriage market--but the ties are not deep" (275-

76). At Bellomont Lily has the chance to become engaged to Percy Gryce, an eligible suitor whose fortune stems from a "patent device for excluding fresh air from hotels" (25). At age twenty-nine, Lily can ill afford to lose a chance to marry Gryce; however, in what becomes a characteristic pattern for her throughout the novel, she does misstep. Lily ignores Percy Gryce, instead encouraging the attentions of Lawrence Selden, a charming suitor but not a rich one, and therefore not a prospect. Selden, in turn, was once Bertha Dorset's extramarital lover, and Bertha still desires his attentions and becomes angry when he spends time with Lily.

Thereafter, Bertha Dorset proves to be one of the most vengeful women in the novel and Lily's most powerful nemesis, all the more problematic since they inhabit the same social circle and cannot easily avoid one another. She is a woman who is a married and rich woman bored with her husband George, and so she relieves her ennui by carrying on a series of affairs with various younger men. As Shulman notes, in Lily's class, "the women have marriage and affairs for their careers" (275). Bertha best represents this lifestyle. Outraged by Lily's relationship with Selden, Bertha Dorset sabotages Lily's possibilities with Percy Gryce. The fact that Lily monopolizes Selden's time is not lost on Bertha Dorset who, for the rest of the novel, seeks to destroy Lily. Judy Trenor early on reminds Lily of this fact:

> If you had a grudge against Bertha it was a

> stupid time to show it--you could have paid her back just as well after you were married! I told you Bertha was dangerous. (60)

Her reproach of Lily's carelessness indicates that Judy recognizes the workings of women's relationships in their society: If one woman breeches another woman's authority, social ascendancy is threatened, and punishment is sure to ensue. As an unmarried woman without a fortune, Lily is powerless in a society ruled by Bertha Dorsets and Judy Trenors. Only by marrying and acquiring her husband's fortune can a woman gain power. Because Lily flirts with Selden, Bertha retaliates by destroying Lily's own marital opportunity.

Not only does Bertha "poiso[n]" Percy Gryce "thoroughly" against Lily, but she also then publicly reminds her of what she has missed by losing Gryce, thus flexing her own power. With an "edge of malice," Bertha reminds Lily of Gryce's fortune: "'he lives on the interest of his income, and always has a lot left over to invest!'" (62).

But the balance of power tilts temporarily after this point, for, ironically, Lily is next put into a position of power over Bertha Dorset when a packet of Bertha's love letters to Selden lands in Lily's possession. From the first moment of this disclosure, Lily is both repulsed and triumphant. Forecasting that she will perhaps use them against Bertha one day, Lily decides to preserve the letters.

When George Dorset invites Lily to their house at Bertha's request, Lily readily accepts despite her knowledge of the "unavowed hostility [that] had kept the two women apart" (94). Lily realizes that, with the letters now in her possession, she maintains some power over Bertha.

This, however, is a naive assumption on Lily's part. As Bertha does not know that Lily possesses the letters to Selden, Lily holds no real power over Bertha unless she chooses to tell Bertha--which she does not do. Worse, Lily does not stop to question why Bertha would call a truce on their feud. She does not yet fully comprehend the depth of Bertha's animosity, which, in fact, continues for the rest of the novel.

But Lily's future is being shaped not only by Bertha Dorset, but also by Lily's own cousin, Grace Stepney. While Bertha works to mold public opinion about Lily, Grace works to poison their Aunt Peniston's mind against her. Whereas Bertha seeks revenge on Lily because she is jealous of Selden's admiration of Lily, Grace Stepney grows resentful of Lily because Lily ignores her and because Aunt Peniston respects Lily's opinion more than she does Grace's. The narrator describes Grace's scrupulous notice of Lily:

> Grace Stepney's mind was like a kind of moral fly-paper, to which the buzzing items of gossip were drawn by a fatal attraction, and where they hung fast in the toils of inexorable memory. Lily

> would have been surprised how many trivial facts concerning herself were lodged in Miss Stepney's head. (96)

Indeed, Lily's naivete about people and her considerable egotism blind her to the consequences of her indifferent treatment of Grace. In one scene, Lily convinces her aunt not to invite Grace to a dinner party in honor of the Jack Stepneys because she feels the party should consist only of "smart people" (97). Further, because Lily does not deem Grace a friend worth cultivating, she does not "measure the pang which this injury inflicts" (97). When Grace learns that she has been excluded from the party, she knows that Lily is to blame, and her "dull resentment turned to active animosity" (97).

In order to inflict like damage upon Lily, Grace tells their Aunt Peniston about the rumors concerning Lily and Gus Trenor. Startled by Mrs. Peniston's moral outrage, Grace falters at the thought of disclosing all of the rumors about Lily: "To the honour of her sex, however, hatred of Lily prevailed over more personal considerations" (98). This last observation, slyly added by the narrator, presents a puzzling eruption in the text. Is the narrator uttering Wharton's own opinions about the betrayal of friends expected of women, or is the narrator showing us that Grace Stepney is vengeful and thus figures as a stereotypical foil for the heroine of the novel?

Many Wharton scholars have speculated on Wharton's own views of women, and several have stated that she may have harbored some animosity for her sex. Her own life and the content of her existing letters indicate, however, that she had many supportive and loving friendships with women.[1] So, a sarcastic comment like this one, placed as it is in a novel of manners, seems not to voice the opinion of the author herself but instead critiques the way in which women in this society, in unequal relationships, battle to maintain their own dignity.

Rather than directly confront Mrs. Peniston with the slight--the party was, after all, held by Mrs. Peniston--Grace instead aims her barbs at Lily, as she views Lily as the one responsible for the slight, and not the more powerful Mrs. Peniston, from whom Grace hopes one day to inherit the older woman's black brocade. Lily, a dependent like Grace, is her social equal and thus more likely to incur her animosity.[2] Single women without immediate financial prospects, Lily and Grace have more in common than they think. But, precisely because of her beauty, Lily's social currency grants her a more elevated standing than is true for Grace.

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[1] While earlier critics like Percy Lubbock state that Wharton "preferred the company of men" to women, other biographers and Wharton's own letters detail that she sustained many close friendships with women throughout her life (54).

[2] Grace Stepney's character calls to mind Matilda Jennings' character in Mary Wilkins Freeman's "A Gala Dress"--a woman jealous of another woman whom she perceives as having more than she does--or Candace in Freeman's "A Village Singer," who is angry at her "rival" Alma Way rather than the ageist congregation that ousts her.

Despite the continual machinations against her, only when Lily flees her near-rape by Gus Trenor does she realize her insecure position in her society. Panicked after Trenor's belligerent advances, Lily heads out into the night. The following passage focuses on Lily's social alienation and especially her lack of a safe, comforting domestic space:

> She opened her eyes and saw the streets passing--the familiar alien streets. All she looked on was the same and yet changed. There was a great gulf between today and yesterday. Everything in the past seemed simple, natural, full of daylight--and she was alone in a place of darkness and pollution--Alone! It was the loneliness that frightened her. (117)

Seeing the world around her for the first time as polluted and realizing her own place in the world as alienated, Lily fears the "hours and hours left of the night" and panics (118). With no home to turn to and "no heart to lean on," Lily decides to turn to Gerty Farish.

Lily's relationship with Gerty is one of the most complex ones in the novel. In a way, their relationship makes perfect sense in the context of the novel. Because Gerty is out of Lily's social orbit, she does not subject Lily to the same kind of scrutiny that Lily's other friends do. While Gerty has always admired and supported Lily, mostly from afar, her affection has grown to "active

adoration" since Lily's generous donation to one of Gerty's philanthropic ventures, the Girls' Club. Although the narrator says that the "sudden shocks of pity" that Lily felt upon interacting with the women in Gerty's club are "sometimes" enough to "decentralize a life," we are assured that "Lily's nature was incapable of such renewal" as "she could feel other demands only through her own" (119). Yet, Lily's motives for helping, however self-serving, are still generous. Certainly Gerty Farish does not suspect, otherwise thinking only that Lily is as philanthropic as she is. Indeed, she has always supported her, claiming to know "'the real Lily'" (120).

Only when Gerty realizes that her cousin Lawrence Selden prefers Lily to her does she begin to think differently of Lily. During one of their suppers alone together, Gerty realizes that Selden really loves Lily and not herself. Rather than rebuff him for his shallowness of only liking Lily for her looks, Gerty, "woman-like. . . accused the woman" (127). This editorial aside by the narrator does not seem to indict Gerty but, rather, suggests that, like many women, Gerty turns on her perceived competitor, not the man who has misled her. Because she will never possess Lily's beauty and charm and because beauty and charm are what are valued in her society, she realizes that she "hated her friend" (129).

Once Gerty encounters Lily in her moment of need after she flees Gus Trenor, Gerty's hatred is short-lived. In a rare moment in the novel, a woman puts aside her own self-interest and acts kindly towards another. Despite her feelings of animosity, Gerty comforts Lily and provides a haven for her when she flees Gus Trenor. When Lily confides in Gerty about her own doubt and self-loathing, Gerty comforts Lily unequivocally. Gerty's kindness prevails.

Lily's trust in Gerty and Gerty's ability to put aside her own self-interest provide one of the few homosocial moments in the novel and create one of the few restorative episodes for Lily. Gerty Farish is one of the most interesting characters in the novel because she is a New Woman. She supports herself, she lives independently, and she is involved in bettering the lives of working women. But Gerty also embodies some of the best values of true womanhood: fidelity, kindness, and moral rectitude. In fact, the novel suggests, her true womanhood valuation of sisterly bonds gives rise to her social advocacy of women. But Gerty,one woman, is not enough to shelter Lily from the storm of gossip and innuendo that Bertha Dorset generates when she subsequently invites Lily to accompany her on a Mediterranean cruise.

The reader gains some understanding of Bertha's motives towards Lily when we are made privy to a conversation between Lawrence Selden and Carry Fisher in Monte Carlo. Mrs. Fisher

tells Selden that Lily has had great success during her tour and that she suspects why Lily always fails in the marriage game. Her comment gives insight into what the reader has long suspected: "I think it's because, at heart, she despises the things she's trying for" (148). Mrs. Fisher also tells Selden that Bertha Dorset only invited Lily so that she can distract Bertha's husband George so that she, in turn, can continue her affair with Ned Silverton:

> We all know that's what Bertha brought her abroad for. When Bertha wants to have a good time she has to provide occupation for George. At first I thought Lily was going to play her cards well *this* time, but there are rumours that Bertha is jealous of her success here and at Cannes, and I shouldn't be surprised if there were a break any day. Lily's only safeguard is that Bertha needs her badly--ah, very badly. (148)

Upon reading this, one wonders why Lily would accept Bertha's invitation to vacation together, but Lily does not seem to reflect on Bertha's motivations for kindness. Lily simply assumes that Bertha wants to make amends and welcomes the opportunity for a change of scenery in which to shrug off her "crushing [financial] difficulties" (153).

Mrs. Fisher further confides to Selden that had Lily any social awareness (or sense of self-advocacy), she would recognize her position of power and make George Dorset aware

of his wife's betrayal: "A clever woman might know just the moment to tear off the bandage: but Lily isn't clever in that way" (148). Although Lily is aware of Bertha's infidelities (she possesses the letters to prove it), she finds that even acknowledging such a liaison would be indelicate. She therefore ignores Bertha's peccadilloes. Unlike Bertha, Lily is not a social predator and, at this point, does not consider turning the tables on Bertha and stealing her husband. The mores of the marketplace have not infected Lily's dealings in her relationships as they have Bertha's.

Everyone in Lily's circle seems aware that Bertha Dorset is having an affair with Ned Silverton. Carry Fisher alludes to it in prior conversations with Selden, and Selden himself witnesses their rendezvous that evening when, positioned above the Promenade, he watches them drive off in a carriage together at twelve o'clock at night.

When George Dorset discovers his wife has spent the night away with another man, he goes into full apoplectic fury over it. Lily assumes, wrongly, that Bertha is quaking with shame and regret and desires to help Bertha out of this uncomfortable social situation because she feels she has an obligation to her as her guest and as a woman. Despite not being "fond" of Bertha, Lily remembers that they "had lived together. . . on terms of easy friendship, and the sense of friction of which Lily had recently become aware seemed to

make it the more urgent that she should work undividedly in her friend's interest" (160).

Lily's mistake is that she imagines that Bertha is like her: someone who would value the kindness of another woman. When Bertha Dorset does not appear on the yacht until seven in the morning, she is able to blame it on Lily, intimating that Lily and George Dorset left Bertha and Ned Silverton stranded alone together. A "sense of remembered treachery that was like the gleam of a knife in the dusk" settles on Lily, and she finally recognizes Bertha's intent (162).

What is the reason for Bertha's treachery? While the catalyst for Bertha's animosity toward Lily might stretch as far back as the weekend at the Bellomont, most of her ire stems more recently from her jealousy over Lily's success with Mediterranean royalty. As Carry Fisher tells Selden,"People say that was one reason why Bertha whisked the yacht off to Sicily: the Crown Princess didn't take much notice of [Bertha], and [Bertha] couldn't bear to look on Lily's triumph" (146). And, finally, in order to preserve her own marital and social position, Bertha uses Lily in a most duplicitous way. Although Bertha intends for Lily to "distract" George from noticing her own dalliances with Ned Silverton, when her risk-taking becomes too obvious, she cites Lily as the reason for her marital problems. Selden himself even reflects on Bertha's transparent motives:

> Selden knew that Bertha would fight to the last round of powder: the rashness of her conduct was illogically combined with a cold determination to escape its consequences. She could be as unscrupulous in fighting for herself as she was reckless in courting danger, and whatever came to her hand at such moments was likely to be used as a defensive missile. (166)

Selden, who knows Bertha as well as anyone, begs Lily to leave the yacht and the Dorsets' marriage troubles before further disaster ensues. Lily, however, ironically says, "'how can you think I would leave Bertha?'" (167). As Mary Papke notes, Lily repeatedly foregoes the opportunity to seek revenge on Bertha because "that act stands against her womanhood ideals" (120). Lily thinks that she is being morally upright in standing by Bertha; however, later that evening, Bertha drives the final nail in the coffin of Lily's reputation. She publicly snubs her by informing her in front of a crowd (gossip columnist included) that she will not be rejoining them on the yacht, effectively banishing Lily for good. Wai-Chee Dimock notes that

> Nowhere is the injustice of exchange more clearly demonstrated than on the *Sabrina*. Lily's presence on the yacht is, as everyone recognizes, simply a business arrangement . . . . And without deviating

> from the model of exchange, Bertha has managed to get her money's worth from Lily; she has managed to get away with a good bargain. (378)

Bertha's horrific treatment of Lily is one of the most chilling scenes in the novel because it is so calculatedly cruel. Selden, a witness to the scene, wonders why Bertha Dorset should "have turned into an enemy at the very moment when she so obviously needed the support of her sex," and he reels "at the cruelty of women to their kind" (170). Although he knows the truth of the situation, just as Carry Fisher seems to, as perhaps do others, he does not defend Lily by revealing what he knows about Bertha and Ned, but instead avoids implicating himself further with his silence. Just as Selden avoids further involvement with Lily, the women in Lily's circle back in New York offer similar treatment after the death of her Aunt Peniston. The powerful sway of marketplace competition proves a potent force in her world.

For instance, as long as the women attending the reading of Mrs. Peniston's will are unsure whether or not Lily will inherit, they are at a loss as to how to react to her, so they neither embrace nor reject her. When she enters her aunt's drawing room, their faces "were a study in hesitation" as they waver on how to treat Lily (173). However, when they learn that Mrs. Péniston has disinherited Lily in favor of Grace Stepney (precisely because Mrs. Peniston believed the

worst rumors about Lily), they ignore her utterly. No one comforts her, and no one is interested in her dilemma. Without money or prospects, Lily becomes a nonentity to them. As Lily later observes to Gerty Farish, "'Did you notice the women? They were afraid to snub me while they thought I was going to get the money--afterward they scuttled off as if I had the plague'" (175).

In Mary Wilkins Freeman's stories, such a fall would dissolve any rivalries, and a tentative friendship would ensue. Unlike the women in Freeman's stories, though, the women in *The House of Mirth* inhabit a loftier social class in which one's worth is defined first and foremost by financial holdings. In Lily's class, women's value is defined by the capitalist mode of production and consumption, so much so that, aside from Lily and Gerty Farish, they seem almost one-dimensional. Their relationships with one another are fraught with competition. There is no room for compassion or empathy for one so different as Lily.

Lily's negative experience with Bertha and her subsequent and consequent disinheritance by her aunt end once and for all Lily's naivete. She finally begins to face squarely her role in her society as well as her role in her own destruction. After Aunt Peniston's disinheritance, Gerty begs Lily to tell her side of events. Lily replies that the truth does not exist in their society; instead, truth is a set of contingent statements the power of which usually

serves the wealthiest: "'it's a great deal easier to believe Bertha Dorset's story than mine, because she has a big house and an opera box, and it's convenient to be on good terms with her'" (176). Lily then begins to come to terms with her situation and her role in her society:

> For though she knew she had been ruthlessly sacrificed to Bertha Dorset's determination to win back her husband, and though her own relation to Dorset had been the merest good fellowship, yet she had been perfectly aware from the outset that her part in the affair was, as Carry Fisher brutally put it, to distract Dorset's attention from his wife. That was what she was "there for": it was the price she had chosen to pay for three months of luxury and freedom from care. (177)

Although Lily does recognize her own part in her failures, she has, for the most part, acted morally. She has not done the things society suspects she has. The one most in need of money, Lily has been true to her women friends, unlike Bertha Dorset and Judy Trenor, who sacrifice friendship for money and social standing. The women's relationships in *The House of Mirth*, then, are much more treacherous than are those in Freeman's *A New England Nun*.

Because Lily's difficult financial situation alienates her from other women who choose to ignore her once she is considered without financial prospects and therefore socially

bankrupt, Lily recognizes that she must settle her debts with Gus Trenor in order to regain Judy Trenor's friendship, a fact that becomes most apparent when Judy snubs her at a restaurant: "If [Judy] was careless of her affections, she was plainly jealous of [Gus's] pocket." Lily decides that "she must be quits with the Trenors" before she can be vindicated (179).

Ironically, Lily next turns to the woman who has secretly envied her for years, Grace Stepney. In her prior dealings with Lily, Grace relied on gossip and innuendo to undermine Lily's relationship with Mrs. Peniston, but she now holds the financial upper hand. When Lily approaches Grace and tries to obtain an advance on her legacy to repay the Trenors, Lily must listen to the other woman's admonitions about Lily's financial missteps even as Grace rejects her requests. In fact, Grace recoils in horror at Lily's proposition that Grace borrow money for her:

> Do you imagine for a moment that I would raise money on my expectations from cousin Julia, when I know so well her unspeakable horror of every transaction of the sort? Well, Lily, if you must know the truth, it was the idea of your being in debt that brought on her illness.(180)

Grace assumes the duty to chastise Lily for her past sins: "'if I can do anything to make you realize the folly of your course . . . I shall feel it is the truest way of making up

to you for her loss'" (180). Grace, in some part responsible for Lily's current financial ruin, blames Lily for being the subject of rumors. Even the most "minor" characters in Lily's life prove infected by greed. Lily, then, takes a "final leave of her old life" and departs. Except for Gerty Farish, Lily has no one to whom to turn.

Because Lily does not want to and feels she cannot turn to Gerty, she recognizes that she must keep up appearances and decides to live with the Gormers. Although their set is one step below the Trenors' and the Dorsets,' she observes that this set, although not exactly her own, has its benefits, for this "caricature" possesses "greater good nature, less rivalry, and a fresher capacity for enjoyment" (182). Gerty tries to convince her that reentering this world, even its lesser version, would be risky. However even knowing that the Gormers are not the social equals of her own set, Lily shrugs off any of Gerty's worries. She assures her that "'If my old friends choose to believe lies about me I shall have to make new ones, that's all'" (185).

Lily's concession to live with the Gormers shows that she only understands her situation at face value. She thinks that paying off the Trenors' debt will suffice, while Gerty recognizes that the social currency runs much deeper and that the Gormers' social set carries the potential to be just as socially bankrupt as its model. Although the Gormers are considerably more relaxed than the Trenors and the Dorsets,

their world still offers the possibility of future mishaps and failures.

Gerty recognizes correctly that to escape with her integrity intact, Lily must abandon the world she has always known. She knows that in "drifting back now to her former manner of life, she was forfeiting her last chance of ever escaping from it" (185). For Gerty, the plain and practical New Woman, change is possible through work and philanthropy. But for Lily, a hothouse flower raised to be a social ornament, such transformation is not possible. While Gerty works to better other women's lives, Lily can critique her own world, recognize its flaws, but cannot effect the means to better it or escape it.

Indeed, Lily's time with the Gormers does not take her very far from her social set, literally or figuratively. In fact, one day Lily encounters George Dorset while strolling on the Gormers' Long Island property, which is in the same neighborhood as the Dorsets. Soon after, Bertha Dorset calls on Lily's host, Mattie Gormer, with the intent to poison the latter against Lily. Carry Fisher informs Lily that Bertha Dorset is only befriending Mattie to wreak revenge on Lily. Because Bertha views Lily as a continuing threat to her marriage (because of Lily's knowledge of Bertha's affairs and because of her husband George's interest in Lily), she seeks to decimate Lily's social standing. As Carry Fisher allows, "'if Bertha is still nasty enough to injure you with the

other people it must be because she's still afraid of you'" (197). The only way for Lily to regain her old friends and her respectabiltiy, Carry insists, is to marry soon to equalize Bertha's power. As the Dorsets' geographical proximity suggests, the power of the rich is far-reaching and nearly impossible for Lily to elude.

The novel takes an interesting turn when Lily approaches Simon Rosedale in hopes of rekindling his interest in her. Because Lily is more of a liability than a satisfactory social prospect, he rebuffs her but not without offering her an alternative. He presents a withering assessment of Lily's place in society and its treatment of her:

> Everybody knows what Mrs. Dorset is, and her best friends wouldn't believe her on oath where their own interests were concerned; but as long as they're out of the row it's much easier to follow her lead than to set themselves against it, and you've been sacrificed to their laziness and selfishness. (201)

He tells Lily that her best chance to reinstate herself is by blackmailing Bertha with her own love letters to Lawrence Selden: were the love letters to fall into George Dorset's possession, he could take them to an attorney, offering the letters as proof for grounds for divorce. Lily will, after all, need Bertha's support if she is to be a viable player in their society, for Simon "would marry her tomorrow if she

could regain Bertha Dorset's friendship" (202). As Rosedale lays out his own plan, essentially a business proposition, Lily recoils in disgust. She recognizes the business terminology implicit in his language as well as how he is trying to insure her cooperation: Rosedale

> assumed, as a matter of course, the likelihood of her distrusting him and perhaps trying to cheat him out of the spoils. This glimpse of his inner mind seemed to present the whole transaction in a new aspect, and she saw that the essential baseness of the act lay in its freedom from risk. (203)

Rosedale, of course, assumes Lily desires to protect Selden. It is just this sort of world that Lily seeks to escape.

But, a world which is not defined in monetary terms is not feasible in Lily's social circle. Her relationship with Mattie Gormer changes from easy sociability to strain. As has happened in her relationships with the Dorsets and Trenors, Lily has become more of a liability than a valuable friend. Lily recognizes that once the Gormers become acquainted with a higher set and once Mattie became acquainted with Bertha, Lily will become dispensable. Lily's

> attempt [to make herself indispensable] had been thwarted by an influence stronger than any she could exert. That influence, in its last analysis, was simply the power of money: Bertha Dorset's

> social credit was based on an impregnable bank-account. (204)

Lily, of course, had realized this before, as was evident when she once told Gerty that it was more convenient for others to believe Bertha because of her financial solidity. Now, however, she realizes that this is true of every social circle she encounters. Bertha's power and thus the power of money begins to seem monolithic to Lily: "More and more, with every fresh mischance befalling her, did the pursuing furies seem to take the shape of Bertha Dorset" (231).

The theory of exchange proves true for every relationship Lily encounters. With Rosedale, Lily expects such dealings; after all, the scenario he presents is a "transaction" to Lily (203). All relationships, however, even those among women, are rendered as a kind of financial exchange. Bertha Dorset possesses more "social credit" than Lily (204). Gerty Farish, on the other hand, possesses too little for Lily to bank on.

Although it is too little, too late, several women at the novel's end emerge as foils for Bertha Dorset and Judy Trenor: Gerty Farish, Miss Kilroy, and Nettie Struther. Gerty Farish stands as the one constant in Lily's life, a beacon of devotion and a symbol of another lifestyle possible for women during this time period. Although Lily appreciates Gerty's fidelity, she finds her simple lifestyle repugnant. Gerty acknowledges that Lily "had no wish for the kind of

help she could give" but also believes that Lily had no other alternative "but in a life completely reorganized and detached from its old associations" (209). In the face of others, like Selden, who disapprove of Lily, Gerty feels a deep connection to Lily, despite Lily's inability to reciprocate:

> [Gerty] had not forgotten the night of emotion when she and Lily had lain in each other's arms, and she had seemed to feel her very heart's blood passing into her friend. The sacrifice she had made had seemed unavailing enough; no trace remained in Lily of the subduing influence of that hour; but Gerty's tenderness, disciplined by long years of contact with obscure and inarticulate suffering, could wait on its object with a silent forebearance which took no account of time. (209)

The image of Lily and Gerty lying together in each other's arms invokes many of the qualities of homosocial bonding between women in the nineteenth century. Interestingly, Gerty is still touched by that moment, even though Lily bears no recognition of that time. Lily's final moments, though, at the novel's end will echo her night of safety and comfort with Gerty and suggest her deep need for such a connection.

Unlike most of the novel's characters, Gerty is able to deflect the "wasted personal emotion [of jealousy and envy] into the general current of human understanding" (209).

Although Lily perceives the inherent problems in her world, unfortunately she is not yet ready to relinquish it. Ironically, she begins to avoid the one real friend she has, Gerty. Indeed, Lily avoids disclosing to Gerty "the full extent of her anxiety" regarding her financial affairs (208). Her avoidance stems partly from humiliation and partly from her fear of becoming a Gerty Farish and living her kind of life.

Even so, Gerty encourages Lily to enter the world of work to try and support herself. Gerty hopes that Lily's beautiful ability to "trim hats" will lead to the latter's eventual financial independence. Although Lily has been unsuccessful in her world, she soon discovers that she is also ill-suited for the world of work. Lily seeks to support herself in a millinery establishment, a place much like that which Christie Devon encounters in Alcott's *Work*. This scene is important as it is a section of the novel that shows, although briefly, a working-class women's work environment and demonstrates Wharton's range of expertise in classifying and depicting women's experience in the late nineteenth century.

Lily's experience at the millinery shop is wholly deflating for her as her "lack of early training" makes her inept at such work (222). Because Lily has come from such a different world and is poorly equipped to assimilate into theirs, none of the other women extends the hand of

friendship to her. Judging from their work time conversation, most dream of becoming part of the upper class and hold her in disdain for falling from her social perch.

Wharton does not stereotype the women, though. As Lily leaves work after a particularly mortifying shift, a Miss Kilroy extends her compassion in a gesture of concern for Lily: "She felt a touch on the arm, and met the penitent eye of Miss Kilroy" (224). This brief moment illustrates that Wharton does not present the working women as a monolithic class, but as one composed of individuals of varying sympathies. Miss Kilroy's gesture, however brief, suggests that human decency can infiltrate even those systems most inhospitable to relationships.

Toward the novel's end, Lily encounters Rosedale again as she finishes her last day of work and as she leaves the chemist's where she has just purchased a sleeping potion. It it this scene that sets the stage and the tone for Lily's encounter with Nettie Struther, the last person who sees her alive. In this conversation, Lily apprises him of her life. She tells him of her recent work and of her lodging at a local boarding house. As she has fallen increasingly out of social favor, practically into non-existence, Lily feels impelled to isolate herself, telling Rosedale that "'I have lived too long on my friends'" (229). Indeed, the narrator tells us, "Circumstances, of late, had combined to cut her off more and more from her few remaining friends" (229).

Soon after, Lily meets Rosedale at her boarding house where they have their final conversation of the novel. Once again, he offers to marry her if she can restore her social position: "'I'd put you where you could wipe your feet on 'em!'" (234). As Rosedale makes clear, Lily has the chance to settle the score with Bertha Dorset by trading the Dorset-Selden letters in exchange for her good name. As Wai-Chee Dimock observes "Properly managed, even revenge can become a form of exchange" (385).

Certainly, Rosedale's proposition does hold a kind of fascination for Lily. As she mulls over his "business arrangement," she considers the role her own integrity should take (233): "Bertha Dorset, to save herself, had not scrupled to ruin her by an open falsehood; why should she hesitate to make private use of the facts that chance had put in her way?" (234). Lily's final decision rests on whether or not to cash in Bertha Dorset's letters for her own social rescue.

On the verge of visiting Bertha Dorset, Lily instead decides to pay a last visit to Lawrence Selden during which she urges him (and herself) to say goodbye to the "Lily Bart you know" (240). In one of the most dramatic moments of the novel, Lily then throws the letters in Selden's parlour fire, an act suggesting that she has abandoned any hopes of evening the social score with Bertha Dorset. Dimock states that by burning the letters and discarding any chances of revenge,

Lily rejects "not so much the idea of revenge as the degradation of revenge in the arena of exchange" (386). Certainly, the final scenes of the novel suggest Lily's refusal to become involved in the taint of the public sphere that has so infected the private relation of friendship between women. Lily thus leaves Selden with her integrity intact, although hers is an act that goes socially unrecognized and unrewarded.

She quickly realizes, however, that she has no home to return to, "Nothing but the silence of her cheerless room" (242). The connection between home and friendship has been linked throughout the novel, but the ensuing encounter with the working-class Nettie Struther cements such a link. The scene with Nettie proves one of the novel's most affecting. Its power rests in its inextricable link between friendship, home and family-- all tenets of women's domestic culture and all of which Lily does not possess. While Lily rests in Bryant Park, Nettie Struther approaches her with a show of concern. As Nettie reminds Lily in their conversation, it was Lily's charitable donation to Gerty's Women's Club that enabled Nettie to go to a sanitorium to regain her health. This detail underscores the importance of women's support and valuation of one another. Lily's gesture, inconsequential as it seemed to her at the time, improved Nettie's life and her outlook on human relationships. In turn, at one of Lily's lowest moments, Nettie offers Lily a supporting arm and an

invitation to come home with her. Except for Gerty, Nettie is one of the few characters who offers help and friendship to Lily without ulterior motives.

The scene of domestic bliss that Lily witnesses at the Struthers' contrasts greatly with her own plight; however, Lily's brief time at Nettie Struther's temporarily buoys her and underscores her decision to remove herself from the taint of the corrupt public sphere. As Nettie recounts her own story of rejuvenation, Lily herself feels revived as she holds Nettie's baby. As Lily regards her own life, she realizes the rootlessness of her parents and of her own world:

> All the men and women she knew were like the atoms whirling away from each other in some wild centrifugal dance: her first glimpse of the continuity of life had come to her that evening in Nettie Struther's kitchen. (248)

Lily's encounter with Nettie thus has a profound impact on her life. This woman's show of solidarity and the strong sense of maternal love and home dramatically affect her:

> The poor little working-girl who had found strength to gather up the fragments of her life, and build herself a shelter with them, seemed to Lily to have reached the central truth of existence. (248)

But for Lily to learn this "central truth of existence," she must leave the social world she is used to, where social relationships resemble business arrangements.

Upon returning alone to her boarding house room, Lily feels a "deeper loneliness" and decides that "nothing now remained to her but the emptiness of renunciation" (249). After receiving the check from her Aunt Peniston's legacy, Lily's final act in the novel is to get her affairs in order by finally repaying Gus Trenor's "loan." In doing so, she absolves herself of connections to that world. Then she reflects finally upon her life:

> She herself had grown up without any one spot of earth being dearer to her than another: there was no centre of early pieties, of grave endearing traditions, to which her heart could revert and from which it could draw strength for itself and tenderness for others. (248)

Lily realizes that she has not known a sense of home in her entire life; since her parents' death, she has ferried back and forth between friends until her social currency has run dry. Likewise, her friends, too, experience a sense of rootlessness. At the novel's end, Lily chooses the "emptiness of renunciation" in order to maintain her own integrity and overdoses on chloral (249). As she dies, she imagines that she holds Nettie Struther's child in her arms

and gains comfort by the "tender pressure of its body" (251). The image of Lily cradling a sleeping baby recalls her inchoate night at Gerty's when she sought and found safety and love in Gerty's arms. Although Lily dreams that she sleeps with the warmth of a child next to her, she dies alone and is found only the following day by her one friend, Gerty Farish, who is later joined by Lawrence Selden. Gerty's desire is for others to believe Lily's death an accident, but Selden investigates Lily's accounts and is finally consoled that, at least, her debts were paid. Lily's last heroic gesture, the burning of Bertha's letters and her own renunciation, remains unknown and unheralded.

Lily, by the novel's end, realizes the mechanisms of women's friendships in her social world but refuses to capitalize on them for her own benefit, relying instead on her ideals of true womanhood and homosocial values. Like Edna in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Lily chooses death in order to avoid a life of compromise in a deeply flawed society, in a culture in which women's relationships are so damaged.

Although cultivated as a social ornament, Lily emerges as remarkably different from the other women in *The House of Mirth*. Although possessed of a limited critical consciousness, Lily is not as corrupt as Mrs. Dorset or as weak and self-serving as Carry Fisher. The reason lies in Lily's ability to step outside her situation and see the

contradictions inherent in it. Her early encounter with Selden that begins the novel as well as her later conversations with him signal her awareness of the corruptions and deceptions needed to succeed in her social circle. Because Lily possesses the ability to critique her society, she is not fully corrupted by it. She maintains a moral center, constructed in part by a valuation of true womanhood ideals, that curbs her from mistreating other women, a virtue sorely lacking in her society.

Wharton's *The House of Mirth* offers a withering indictment of the limitations of women's friendships within the competition of a capitalist American society. The novel, though, offers a glimpse of alternative relationships between women. With Gerty Farish and Nettie Struther, one sees that connections between women can exist if they are untainted by the public sphere and if they possess those qualities of women's homosocial culture. Although Wharton's text offers a wide-ranging critique of women's lives in the novel--from a look into the millinery establishment to the upper class to the philanthropic lives of the New Woman--*The House of Mirth* is just that: a critique, not a solution. Ten years Charlotte Perkins Gilman, taking the best of the true womanhood ideals and abolishing patriarchy and capitalism, would write and publish *Herland* and so provide the prescription for the malaise that Wharton so astutely and movingly recorded.

Chapter Five:

Building "Unbroken Friendships" in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*

> "Why, this is a civilized country . . . . There must be men." (Gilman, *Herland* 11)
>
> Men are like plants; the goodness and flavour of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow. We are nothing but what we derive from the air we breathe, the climate we inhabit, the government we obey, the system of religion we profess, and the nature of our employment. (Crevecouer 50)

It seems only fitting to conclude this study with Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a writer who spent most of her adult life devoted to bettering the lives of women and raising public consciousness about them. Like Alcott, Freeman, and Wharton, Gilman wrote primarily about women and the social changes women were experiencing. Unlike these writers she intended her fiction to inspire and evoke social change. While their works recorded the mechanisms and antagaonisms of women's friendships, Gilman's fiction, most notably her utopian novel *Herland* (1915), offered a prescription for improving the bonds between women by eradicating the social structures that impeded such connections.

During the separation from her first husband, Charles Walter Stetson, and their eventual divorce in 1894, Gilman began what became a prolific writing career. Best known for her much-anthologized short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," an

autobiographically based account of her reaction to Weir Mitchell's rest cure, Gilman actually wrote across a variety of genres and always with the intention of fomenting social change.

In 1893 Gilman published her first book, *In This Our World*, a book of poetry. In 1898 she published *Women and Economics*, a treatise on women's economic subordination to men, her first book of prose, written over the course of fifty-eight days (Lane, *To Herland* 198). The early part of the new century found Gilman prolifically producing four more influential sociological treatises on issues relating to women and the home: *Concerning Children* (1900), *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903), *Human Work* (1904), and *Women and Social Service* (1907). From 1909-1916, Gilman began a herculean project: writing, editing, and publishing *The Forerunner*, a journal devoted primarily to women's issues. As Gary Scharnhorst notes in his "Preface," in the seven years in which Gilman wrote and published this journal, she wrote the "equivalent of twenty-eight books at the rate of 21,000 words per month" (n.p.). Eventually, Gilman stopped writing and publishing *The Forerunner* due to the financial burden of printing costs (Scharnhorst 105). Scharnhorst notes that each year's publication of the journal cost Gilman $3000 to publish, and "Each annual volume, by Gilman's own estimate, equalled four books of thirty-six thousand words"; unfortunately, income from "all sales and subscriptions, at a

dime per issue and a dollar per year, totalled only half that amount" (84). Despite the journal's lack of profit, Gilman's work on *The Forerunner* was a labor of love and a committed attempt to address issues important to her, on her own terms.

The Forerunner, that is, proved a perfect arena for Gilman to publish her three utopian novels: *Moving the Mountain* (1911), *Herland* (1915), and *With Her in Ourland* (1916). Of these, *Herland* is the most well-known. In 1915 Gilman began serializing *Herland* in *The Forerunner*. Within each issue of *The Forerunner* that year, Gilman published one chapter of her utopian novel, along with articles on free speech, suffrage, women's dress, birth control, the ill effects of war, and, of course, motherhood.

Since *Herland* was published serially but never released in novel form after its initial *Forerunner* publication, the novel did not generate an immediate contemporary critical response. Sixty-four years later *Herland* was published in book form when Pantheon released the novel in 1979 along with an introduction by Ann J. Lane.

Despite enjoying critical acclaim during her lifetime, Gilman was not highly regarded at the time of her death--just as Alcott, Freeman, and Wharton suffered similar critical indifference. Carl N. Degler writes that Gilman's "neglect in American history [is] difficult to explain" (11). Ann Lane, in *To Herland and Beyond: The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1990), notes that although *Women*

and Economics "had an immediate and enormous impact on radical and reform writers and critics . . . . recognition of the importance of her ideas . . . did not last beyond the first two decades of this century." Lane speculates that one reason for Gilman's fade into literary obscurity rests with the political and social "conservatism" following World War I (253).

Joanne Karpinski, in an introduction to *Critical Essays on Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, gives several reasons for Gilman's loss of popularity in the 1920s, even as women acquired the constitutional right to vote. Gilman did not see herself just as a suffragist and remained unconvinced that the vote itself would provoke "fundamental changes in economic and social institutions" needed to forge important societal changes for women (1). Karpinski also notes that Gilman's "radical message was out of phase with the modernist mainstream" because "she rejected the sexual liberation that fueled the roar of the twenties, and [she] disliked most manifestations of the modernist aesthetic" (2).

Like, then, the work of previous writers discussed in this study, Gilman's fiction was disregarded until a few seminal essays generated interest, with the greatest revival occurring in the 1970s and 1980s. Generally, Carl Degler's essay "Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Theory and Practice of Feminism," first published in *American Quarterly* in 1956, is regarded as pivotal in igniting interest in Gilman's work.

In this influential work, Degler calls Gilman "the major intellectual leader of the struggle for women's rights, in the broadest sense, during the first two decades of the twentieth century" (11). Joanne Karpinski hails Degler as the "patriarch of the scholarly Gilman revival" and says his article prompted the reprint of *Women and Economics* in 1966 (Karpinski, "Introduction" 5). Similarly, Gary Scharnhorst claims Degler's work "inaugurated the modern revival of interest in Gilman" (135).

Critical response to the 1979 edition was unanimously positive, especially so in recognizing Gilman's skillful interweaving of humor and social critique. Phoebe Lou Adams in a brief review in *Atlantic Monthly* praised *Herland*'s humor and called it a "period piece that is well worth the resurrection" (99). In the *New York Times Book Review*, Louise Berkinow extolled the way Gilman "saw the ways in which domestic life devastates women. She set herself squarely against Marxism imagining what kind of revolution would make the world safe for everyone" (21). Carla Waldemar, reviewing *Herland* in *The Christian Science Monitor*, lauded Gilman's use of humor for her feminist purposes and calls the utopian work "as relevant today (so much for progress!) as it was when it was written 65 years ago" (19). Only a brief review in *Booklist* comes close to criticizing the novel, and then only for its "abrupt ending [which] stops

this book a fraction short of being a major tour de force" (1569).

In 1980 Mary A. Hill published the first book-length study of Gilman, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Making of a Radical Feminist, 1860-1896*. Relying on many unpublished texts, lectures, and letters, Hill's work is valuable for providing a layered and informative context for Gilman's feminist growth. Although Hill's biography ends in 1896, nineteen years before Gilman published *Herland*, her study presents an interesting context for Gilman's growing beliefs about women's position in American society and illustrates the context from which *Herland* sprang.

Gary Scharnhorst also released a biography of Gilman, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, in 1985. Scharnhorst's study offers a helpful and more comprehensive look at Gilman's poetry and essays, not just her famous story, "The Yellow Wallpaper."

In 1990 Ann J. Lane's *To Herland and Beyond: The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* appeared. Unlike Hill's earlier biography, Lane's covers Gilman's life from birth to death, focusing primarily on Gilman's relationships with the people in her life: her father, mother, female friends, husbands and daughter. Hill's and Lane's biographies do much toward providing a background of the role of women's friendships in Gilman's life.

While Scharnhorst and Lane offer very brief discussions of *Herland*, more recent scholarship, largely articles, have provided the main intellectual debate and have generated a richer discussion of the novel's attributes and failings. Ann J. Lane has been most responsible for bringing Gilman's fiction to contemporary readers and critics. After Pantheon reprinted *Herland* in 1979, Lane edited *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader* in 1980, a collection of selected Gilman stories, including "The Yellow Wallpaper" and excerpts from Gilman's three utopian novels. Lane's introduction to *Herland* provides a short overview of Gilman's life and work and discusses *Herland* as a utopian work that successfully incorporates humor.

Also in 1980, Mary A. Hill published "Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Feminist's Struggle with Womanhood" in *The Massachusetts Review*. Hill's work primarily discusses Gilman's attempt to reconcile her political beliefs with her femininity. Hill also writes briefly about *Herland*, explaining that "theoretically as well as fictionally, Gilman asserted the natural superiority of the female sex." Gilman, Hill rightly asserts, offered a traditional view of women as upholding their "civilizing capacities" (523).

Frances Bartkowski's 1982 dissertation entitled "Toward a Feminist Eros: Readings in Feminist Utopian Fiction," in turn, provides a helpful chapter on the connection between *Herland* and *Les Guerilleres*. In her discussion, Bartkowski

critiques Gilman's envisioning of a world "untainted by conflict, hostility and aggression," whereas Wittig's *Les Guerilleres* "represents women warriors both at play and at war" (38-39).

Significant work on *Herland* continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In 1986, Christopher P. Wilson's "Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Steady Burghers: The Terrain of *Herland*" examines Gilman's literary aims in *Herland*, noting that she sought to fashion a socialist and feminist text by "remodifying literary and pictorial conventions," linking "standards of taste to received gender roles and expectations" (175).

In 1988, Polly Wynn Allen published *Building Domestic Liberty: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Architectural Feminism.* This well-documented, imaginative approach to Gilman's work examines her "architectural" approach to bettering women's lives, focusing especially on Gilman's "appreciation of the importance of spatial design to gender relationships" (5). Of *Herland*, Allen offers both positive and negative critique. She praises the novel's "pro-woman spirit" (98) but castigates its vision of a "starkly racist utopia" whose inhabitants lack diversity, only sporting Aryan features (101).

A year later, in 1989, Marsha A. Smith published an interesting work in *American Transcendental Quarterly* focussing on Gilman's use of male narration in her utopian

novels. Smith's study provides a helpful way to consider Gilman's use of male narrators in her utopic fiction, especially *Herland*. Her study is helpful because it shows Gilman's vision of equality between the sexes, a vision that Smith asserts was developed from the time Gilman published "The Yellow Wallpaper" to the release of the three utopian novels.

In 1989, Susan Gubar published "*She* in *Herland*: Feminism as Fantasy" in the collection *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Woman and Her Work*. Gubar's essay looks at the relationship between H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1886) and Gilman's *Herland*, ultimately asserting that *Herland* is "a coming to terms" with *She* and that in doing so Gilman "confronted the misogyny implicit in the imperialist romance" (192).

Kathleen Margaret Lant, however, argues against Gubar's interpretation of *Herland* in an essay published in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* in 1990, "The Rape of the Text: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Violation of *Herland*." Lant argues that while Gilman does "attempt such a re-imagining of our metaphors for female experience, she violates the message she conveys by making her utopian novel a "romance" between men and women, which artistic choice undermines her motive (292).

In 1994, Lois Rudnick published "Feminist Utopian Visions and the 'New Woman': Jane Addams and Charlotte

Perkins Gilman." Addressing the issue briefly discussed in Allen's work, Rudnick praises the novel but characterizes Gilman's utopia as "frighteningly protofascist in its ideas about eugenic breeding" (191). Nevertheless, says Rudnick, Addams's and Gilman's writings are important feminist texts of the early century (192).

Although all of the critical commentary thus far about *Herland* offers a multitude of critical approaches to the novel, Gilman's treatment of women's relationships has yet to be fully examined. Indeed, *Herland* offers a prescription for improving relations between women and is thus worthy of further examination. The novel presents a complete retooling of society's treatment and expectations of women. In *Herland*, Gilman articulates and untangles the conflicts in women's friendships so clearly evident in Alcott, Freeman, and Wharton's work. All of these writers' works show the limitations in women's friendships, relationships that seek to exercise the best aspects of true womanhood but that are impeded and frustrated by competitive marketplace values that have bled into and infected private relations. Gilman's Herlanders, in contrast, have created a world devoid of capitalism and sexism, a world that fosters relationships above materialist acquistion. Gilman's portrayal of the Herlanders' mores does not just serve as a forum for Gilman's ideas; in addition, Gilman's novel shows the systemic relation of all aspects of cultures in people's lives. Since

Gilman intended her work to be a utopia, her characters in *Herland* do not act as characters in a realistic novel. There are no episodes or scenes that further advance the novel's plot. *Herland*, in fact, is divided into areas of "study" for the male explorer/narrator, Vandyck Jennings. These areas of study on history, parthenogenesis, and other topics serve as ways to show how women's lives can improve in society and, by extension, how their relationships with one another can deepen.

If her fiction is any evidence, Gilman's writing reflects her interest in discovering the forces that not only divide women but also unite them in cooperation and mutual appreciation. Like *Herland*, much of Gilman's short fiction portrays women working together. "Making a Change," first published in *The Forerunner* in the 1911 December issue, depicts the conflicts between a young mother, her husband, child, and her mother-in-law. The family's unhappiness stems from the tension between the young mother and her mother-in-law, who are at odds because of their adherence to codes of gendered behavior. The young mother, Julia, an accomplished musician, abandons her talents in exchange for full-time motherhood and housekeeping. Her mother-in-law, Mrs. Gordins, lives with them, feeling useless and extraneous. Upon learning of Julia's eventual suicide attempt, Mrs. Gordins rushes to her rescue and tells her, "'I understand . . . . I've got the *loveliest* plan to tell you about. We *are*

going to make a change'" (Gilman, *Reader* 71). Julia and Mrs. Gordins change their lifestyles dramatically: Julia begins giving music lessons, they hire a maid (whom they pay better wages than they paid the previous maids), and Mrs. Gordins undertakes child care for over a dozen children. Once each woman gains a sense of social purpose, the family and its members are happier. When Frank discovers the women's plans, he is glad for the improved atmosphere in the home. The story's conclusion suggests that while once tension and discord existed between its female members, harmony and affection can reign when traditional roles are discarded.

"Turned," which appeared in the 1911 issue of *The Forerunner*, presents a more drastic social prescription: Women must leave behind the corruption of men altogether to attain true solidarity. The plot Gilman presents is a familiar one, that of a love triangle, but with an unusual and implausible ending. In the story Mr. and Mrs. Marroner's young naive servant Gerta, of whom the couple is fond, becomes pregnant by Mr. Marroner. Rather than rejecting Gerta and banishing her from their lives, Mrs. Marroner reconsiders, taking into account Gerta's "obedience" and "ignorance" and her husband's treacherous behavior (Gilman, *Reader* 93). This turn of events is unlike the actions taken by Alcott's, Freeman's, and Wharton's characters, who tend to blame the women around them. Instead, Mrs. Marroner and Gerta leave together to raise the child. Mrs. Marroner's

motivation to forgive Gerta and blame her husband are because of his sins against "'womanhood. Against motherhood'" (Gilman, *Reader* 94). When Mr. Marroner eventually discovers them, Mrs. Marroner is "calm, steady" and Gerta is much improved, "with a new intelligence in her face" (97). Her "adoring eyes" are "fixed" upon her friend (Gilman, *Reader* 97). "Turned" shows that solidarity between women, even in adverse situations, is possible. Both "Making a Change" and "Turned," published four years prior to *Herland*, show the ways in which Gilman was seriously and diligently examining the problems women faced in their society and the choices they could make in changing their perceptions concerning one another and the ways in which they could improve their relationships with one another.

Herland, surprisingly, begins from a male point of view, as do all of Gilman's utopian novels. This narrative choice, used as it is in a novel about a women's utopia, has fueled critical discussion. Marsha A. Smith, who discusses Gilman's use of male narration in her three utopian works, posits that the male point of view "places the reader at the conscious center of the existing dominant power and therefore at the center of the process of change necessary to accomplish Gilman's utopian fiction" (123). In her dissertation chapter on *Herland*, Frances Bartkowski praises Gilman's use of a male narrator as "revelatory" for its gesture which "welcomed" male and female readers (28). The narrator

Vandyck Jennings travels with two fellow explorers, Terry O. Nicholson and Jeff Margraves, whose interest is piqued when they learn of an all-woman country, Herland. Their reactions to the Herlanders provide a foil for the utopic society that they "discover." But Gilman's use of men also suggests that men too can benefit from the eradication of sexism. As Smith states, Gilman's "ultimate goal must be not only a 'New Woman' but a 'New Man'" (124).

The novel's first chapter, "A Not Unnatural Enterprise," which recounts the explorers' desire to find a "Woman Land," largely sketches the men's preconceptions and expectations of women, or societal notions about women and femininity (2). The three men represent three types of (male) societal attitudes about femininity. Although all three men espouse male chauvinism to varying degrees, Terry's character is the most severely sexist. Terry, who wants to master the Herland women, subdue them, and overwhelm them with his male ardor, is also the most volatile and the most angry at the women's indifference to his charm. When they do not live up to his expectations of them as women, he claims they are not women. Toward the novel's end, when his flattery fails to seduce his Herlander wife Alima, he resorts to attempted rape.

Jeff is also a recognizable type, the romantic who idealizes women and who elevates them to the pedestal. Yet Jeff's type, as *Herland* demonstrates, despite his obvious

limited perspective, is more capable of positive change than is the chauvinistic Terry.

The novel's narrator and the group's only sociologist, Vandyck also possesses rather conventional notions of women and what they should be but is finally the most impressed by the women and the most willing to embrace their unique culture. As the narrator, Vandyck proves to be the most rational and accepting, even admiring of the women he encounters.

The men's types and responses to women are evident in their expectations and anticipations of meeting the Herlanders. Jeff, the idealist, assumes the country would be "blossoming with roses and babies and canaries and tidies" (7). In contrast, Terry entertains visions of a "sort of sublimated summer resort--just Girls and Girls and Girls." As the group's sociologist, Vandyck, also the most rational, predicts that the culture must be established "on a sort of matriarchal principle." Yet he too supposes that men must exist in this culture, even just for the express purpose of breeding (7).

Herland's first chapter, then, continues with the male characters' questioning of the possibilities and implications of an all-women country. As very recognizable late nineteenth, early twentieth-century men, Gilman's portrayal of their responses appear to signify societal notions about women.

Terry's and Jeff's responses are two obvious, though opposite, characterizations of women. As the male explorers envision the culture they will encounter, they offer two conventional views of women available at that historical point: as contentious or angelic. Terry, denying the possibility of a country run solely by women, insists that women would have difficulty cooperating with one another: "'They would fight among themselves . . . . Women always do. We musn't look to find any sort of order and organization'" (8). Jeff, offering the counter but equally limiting stereotype, says that, instead the country will be sexless, contemplative space--"'like a nunnery under an abess--a peaceful, harmonious sisterhood'" (8).

Bringing the two disparate visions together, Vandyck's ensuing comment questions the compatibility of motherhood and sisterhood: "'Where there's motherhood you don't find sisterhood--not much'" (8). His response raises a central condition that the novel attempts to address: What social conditions prevent women from being unified, from forging meaningful connections to other women?

In her *Critical Practice*, Catherine Belsey discusses Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and the ways in which social practices shape behaviors and attitudes, so much so that some behaviors become "natural." Belsey desribes these ISAs as institutions through which "ideological practices are supported and reproduced," such as

"the family, the law, the media and the arts, all helping to represent and reproduce the myths and beliefs necessary to enable people to work within the existing social formation" (58).

Herland illustrates the powerful sway of ISAs in the lives of the male explorers. Throughout the novel, Vandyck's description of the Herlanders amplifies their childcare practices, religion, literature, exercise, and dance. All of these issues are ones that concerned Gilman and that she wrote about extensively in *The Forerunner*. Vandyck's description of these practices serves a stark contrast to those of American women at that historical point and highlights the limitations of the construction of femininity in American culture. Through the cultural juxtaposition of these two worlds, Gilman's text undermines the received dominant assumptions about women.

For example, in the third chapter, "A Peculiar Imprisonment," Vandyck describes the women's clothes and hair, offering a critique of early twentieth-century standards of women's appearance. After the men are apprehended by the Herlanders, the explorers awake and find themselves prisoners, outfitted in clothing designed by the women. The clothes are plain, "simple in the extreme, and absolutely comfortable," Vandyck tells us (26). Rather than wearing different or more extreme versions of the men's clothing to emphasize their own difference, the women wear

similar garb. Vandyck observes that the women's clothing is "sensible" (26). Likewise, the women's hairstyles are simple.

At this point in the novel, Vandyck declares that there is a "subtle difference" between these women and others he has known (30). First, he discusses the issue of "personal appearance": "They all wore short hair, some few inches at most; some curly, some not" (30). As their hair grows longer for lack of a nearby barber, the men take note of the women's short hair and the way in which women's hair serves as an important signifier for femininity in American culture. Jeff remarks that were their hair longer, "'they would look so much more feminine'" (30). Vandyck speculates that men's masculinity and women's femininity are defined by such markers:

> Why we should so admire a "woman's crown of hair" and not admire a Chinaman's queue is hard to explain, except that we are convinced that the long hair "belongs" to a woman . . . . But I did miss it--at first. (30)

This third chapter does much as well to underscore the abilities of women and to dispel cultural myths about them. Besides hair and clothing, Vandyck also praises their language, their athleticism, and their games and educational goals (32). Because these features are so unlike those of the women in early twentieth-century America, Terry, the most

chauvinistic of the men, decries the Herlanders' unwomanliness. Throughout the chapter and the rest of the novel, he refers to the women as "'The Colonels'" (27), "'grandmas,'" and "'Great aunts'" (30). He wonders when they will discover the "'real women . . . the mothers and the girls'" (31). His comment echoes his and Jeff's dominant images of women: as maternal beings or sex objects.

The men's one-sided observations and deflated assumptions about women provide much of the novel's humor, but their expectations about the inseparability of sex and gender befuddle them when they encounter the women's lack of awareness of, even indifference to, femininity and masculinity. Jeff observes that "'they treat us--well--just as they do one another. It's as if our being men was a minor incident'" (30). The rest of *Herland* seeks to show how culturally inscribed gender is and the way in which it influences and shapes our relationships.

Much of what *Herland* celebrates is women's ability to achieve when cooperation, not division, exists among them. That cooperation, *Herland* suggests, is made possible by the women's complete self-sufficiency. There are no separate spheres and no competition for the attention of men or for scant resources. Even in the arena of childbirth, the women are made entirely self-reliant through the process of parthenogenesis.

Before the women explain their parthenogenetic abilities, they share their history with the explorers. Their past history, they believe, is crucial for understanding the very deliberate choices they have made to create a perfect society. Vandyck describes the Herlander ancestors as a "polygamous people, and a slave-holding people, like all of their time" (54). His comment suggests to the reader that the Herlanders spring from corrupt origins but perfected their line.

Since they were able to shift from their original paradigms, they create a better, more harmonious society. After a volcanic eruption, Vandyck tells us, few slaveholding men survived, and those survivors were overthrown by slaves who revolted, killed the men, old women and mothers, planning to spare the girls and young women and keep them for their own use. The "infuriated virgins . . . .instead of submitting, rose in sheer desperation and slew their brutal conquerors." Only "hysterical girls" and "older" slave women survived (55). These remaining women were the founders of Herland. In time, the community of surviving women grew "stronger and wiser and more mutually attached" (56). The women developed this connection largely through their abandoning previous modes of thought, by drastically changing their ideological state apparatuses and by creating new social relationships. They created, among other things, their own language, agricultural system, literature, dance,

and childrearing practices. As Crevecouer advocates, shedding old identities and discarding outmoded ways of thinking to create a new history, the Herland demonstrate that change is possible if a society abandons outdated modes of thought. In fact, in one scene, the men explorers and the women of Herland disagree about attitudes to the past. Vandyck asks them why they do not revere the past and their ancestors. In surprise, they reply, "'Why should we? They are all gone. They know less than we do'" (111). As such, their forward thinking frees them from obeying norms they had no voice in creating.

One metaphor for new beginnings is the women's method of procreation, parthenogenetic birth. The miracle of parthenogenesis originated from one young woman, one of the original survivors, who autonomously bore five girls. In turn, all five girls later became mothers, generating a "new race" of "parthenogenetic women" (57). Thus, a self-sufficient matriarchy was born: "One family, all descended from one mother!" (57).

Gilman's use of parthenogenesis is an unusual and, of course, incredible *deus ex machina*. But Gilman's use of autonomous birth also serves as an interesting way for women to start over and recreate a society on their own terms. Parthenogenesis renders the women of Herland wholly independent of men and frees them from the prescribed roles of maternal angel or sexual whore, for while traditional

thinking posits that women's biological capacity to bear children predicates their economic and physical dependency on men, *Herland*'s use of parthenogenesis refutes this. By erasing men from the act of creation, *Herland* shows that women's roles as mothers do not relegate them to dependency. Instead, by forging social relationships that posit communitarian, non-nuclear families, all women in the society take part in the act of mothering, rather than in isolation.

In Herland, citizens are raised in a community of mothers, rather than by just one, to the point that children do not bear their mother's surnames. The Herlanders emphasize community, not individualism. As Vandyck tells us, the Herlanders take care that the material culture is owned and appreciated by all, they work together, and their subjective nature also thinks in terms of community: "They themselves were a unit, a conscious group; they thought in terms of community" (79). As a result, they prioritize their relationships with one another. Similar to the Victorian valorization of motherhood that Carroll Smith-Rosenberg describes in *Disorderly Conduct*, Herland women view motherhood as their greatest achievement and their children as their singlemost priority. Smith-Rosenberg observes that in nineteenth-century life, "Mother-daughter bonding served as the model for subsequent relations with other women" (32). Although Smith-Rosenberg speaks of nineteenth-century women's bonding, Gilman's characters act similarly, embodying some of

these dynamics; love and commitment to children are a heightened form of their devotion to one another. Gilman's community of mothers and daughters stands as a revision of the nineteenth-century family wherein the fixed boundaries of the later nuclear family did not exist. Smith-Rosenberg describes such a world:

> The clean lines that distinguish the generations in the twentieth-century families, that set apart members of the nuclear household from first cousins, aunts, uncles, even grandparents, were inconceivable in most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century homes. (33)

Rather than just a mother-daughter relationship in the home, a "spectrum of alternative maternal figures surrounded the young girl" (34). This aspect of nineteenth-century domesticity may have served as a way for Gilman to recuperate the past into her forward-thinking utopia. In *Herland*, Vandyck observes that the Herland women first experience a powerful connection with their own mother and with other maternal figures in their world, but they also, as they mature into adults, learn of a "wide range of sisterhood" and "friendships" (96). As such, they prize their relationships and their commitment to one another.

As Vandyck also observes, their primary focus as a nation is the nurturing of children into purposeful, well-adjusted Herland citizens. Vandyck criticizes the practice

of American mothers as wholly fixated on their own children and completely indifferent to other children. Not so in Herland where the inhabitants devote their whole lives to the care of children. While other activities like gardening and architecture sustain them, childcare is their unifying mission. The Herlanders do practice a kind of eugenics, though, deeming some women unfit for motherhood and forbidding them from procreating, an aspect that has troubled critic Lois Rudnick. In any case, they choose to limit their population so that they are able to provide much: "plenty of everything, including room, air, solitude even" (71).

The Herlanders' call to sisterhood exists not just because of a lack of competition but also because of a commitment to social purpose. In the absence of capitalism and competition, the women live harmoniously. The explorers are amazed that the women still work because they, the men, believe that competition spurs "'stimulus to industry'" (60). Vandyck discusses the phenomena further and notes the positive aspects. As "all sisters and friends," they "grew together--not by competition, but by united action" (59, 60). *Herland* suggests that real social progress can be achieved and social relationships can thrive without the driving "motor power" of competition (60).

Terry's character is, of course, quite skeptical that women could be capable of such work together. He questions the possibility of women consistently and cohesively working

together, as the Herlanders claim they do, and he offers a more stereotypical view of women: "'We all know women can't organize--that they scrap like anything--are frightfully jealous'" (58). Terry's views of women as naturally contentious, as being incapable of working together, are refuted soundly in *Herland*. In earlier work, however, Gilman decries women's lack of unity and thus shows that this is an issue that has concerned her throughout her writing life. For instance, in the poem "The Anti-Suffragists" from *In This Our World*, the speaker criticizes upper-class women who, despite having all their material needs met, lack desire for political power. The poem exhorts contemporary women, enjoying the rights won by earlier women activists, to recognize the struggle of earlier generations of women. She refers to these "selfish women" as "pigs in petticoats" (33). At the poem's end, the speaker lambasts those women, "women uniting against womanhood," who stand in the way of other women's social and political progress (54). Like reactionary politics of the women Gilman criticizes in "The Anti-Suffragists," Terry's views of women stem from his own desired comfort and reliance on the separation of spheres and rigid gender roles to achieve self-satisfaction.

Terry's character is the novel's most obvious foil for examining the reasons why women are not able to forge closer alliances. In *Women and Economics*, Gilman's most extended treatise on the effects of economic inequality on women,

Gilman addresses the problems in women's friendships in contemporary America. She critiques the current "methods of association" among women:

> They arise, and go to "call" on one another. They solemnly "return" these calls. They prepare much food, and invite many people to come and eat it; or some dance, music, or entertainment is made the temporary ground of union. But these people do not really meet one another. They pass whole lifetimes in going through the steps of these elaborate games, and never become acquainted. There is a constant thirst among us for fuller and truer social intercourse; but our social machinery provides no means for quenching it. (307)

What *Herland* does is provide the "social machinery" for fuller, productive relations between women. Terry's comment that "'women cannot cooperate--it's against nature'" shows the prevailing notions of women as rooted in nature. Instead, Gilman shows that, in fact, provided the "social machinery," women can cooperate. That is, *Herland* illustrates the notion of women's nature as a social construct and that, likewise, women's relationships are equally socially constructed.

Unlike Alcott's *Work*, Freeman's *A New England Nun*, and Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Gilman's *Herland* does not

depict an actual friendship between female main characters. Instead, she portrays the unity of an entire community of women wherein friendship has become a primary value. However, in Chapter Eleven, the novel moves away from the portrayal of the women's unity. Rather, the last three chapters focus more on the relationships between the explorers and the young women they eventually marry. The novel ends with Vandyck and his wife Ellador preparing to leave Herland together.

Herland is not a realistic novel but, like all utopic novels, a call to action and an appeal to our better natures. Unlike *Work* or *A New England Nun*, *Herland* does not aim to record the surfaces of contemporary life but instead attempts to address societal ills and to correct them. *Herland* challenges the "naturalness" of gender characteristics and, by extension, the social conditions under which those characteristics are formed.

Not only is Gilman's *Herland* a significant feminist text of the early 1900s, but it also falls within a distinct tradition of early writings about America, specifically echoing those of St. John Crevecoeur. In *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crevecoeur writes of the American experience of shedding old identities and old ways of thinking and becoming a new American. Crevecouer in "Letter III" writes that "The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form

new opinions" (50). Gilman's utopia about a country of all women underscores the ability to improve life by changing mindset and consciousness, rather than, say, through new technology.

Yet, in some ways, *Herland* comes full circle to embrace the ideals tentatively broached in Alcott's *Work*. *Work* ends utopically, with the main character Christie embraced in a "loving league of sisters" (442). But while Alcott's novel fails to address the ways in which such alliances can be forged, *Herland* achieves this. Like *Work*, *Herland* outlines the need to repair failing social systems and outdated notions of femininity, replacing them with the best values recuperated from true womanhood, namely the bonds of motherhood and sisterhood. Placing a primacy on such alliances, Vandyck tells us, will eventually create "exquisite and unbroken friendships" (Gilman, *Herland* 94).

Afterword

On October 6, 1996, during a talk presented for the Springfield, Massachusetts, Public Lecture Series, Toni Morrison spoke of her original desire to embark on what would become a successful writing career. One reason for turning to writing, she said, was to write the books that she wanted to read but could not find. She stated that literature needed to confront complex issues. Female friendship in all its complexity, she said, was one of the issues she wished to address. Her 1973 novel *Sula* evolved from that desire. While much contemporary fiction has idealized women's friendship or merely rendered it quirky, *Sula* is a work that delves into conflicts within friendship. Interestingly, many of the conflicts *Sula* articulates are ones that appear in the four previously discussed works of this study, suggesting that their relevance continues and that the issues they present demand attention, even in today's fiction.

Like the previously discussed works in this study, *Sula* presents friends whose differences arise when the characters must confront one another's differing value systems. The tensions Sula and Nel experience arise because, as adults, they respond to very different codes of gendered behavior. In *The House of Mirth*, during the episode on the *Sabrina*, Lily Bart and Bertha Dorset respond to very different social cues: Lily attempts to protect Bertha while Bertha responds with abject cruelty. In *Sula*, Nel lives a relatively

traditional life as wife and mother, while Sula lives an unconventional life, which eventually results in her becoming the community pariah.

The dynamics of the characters' friendship in *Sula* can be read to embody the evolving nature of women's relationships in the late nineteenth century--from the homosocial bonds between women to the eventual dissolution of those bonds generated by the changing social forces in the United States. In the beginning of the novel when Sula and Nel are just girls, they experience the most intense stage of their friendship, a stage that most resembles the homosocial bonds between women of the nineteenth century:

> So when they met, first in the chocolate halls and next through the ropes of the swing, they felt the ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all the freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be . . . . Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers . . . they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for. (52)

Like the homosocial bonds initially experienced by Christie Devon in Alcott's *Work*, the friendship between Nel and Sula grows because they seek a powerful intimacy they otherwise lack. As Sula and Nel mature and become more cognizant of

social expectations, however, the bond between them dissolves.

Just as the close bonds between women dissolved as women's lives changed and as notions of gender altered, Nel and Sula's friendship disintegrates when Nel marries and Sula chooses an alternate lifestyle. Nel feels compelled to turn her attention to her husband Jude and away from Sula: "Nel's response to Jude's shame and anger selected her away from Sula. And greater than her friendship was this new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly" (84). When Sula returns to Medallion years later, the differences between the women become most apparent. Sula's brief affair with Nel's husband Jude ends their marriage and, effectively, the women's relationship, too. That is, Sula's unconventional behavior and attitudes toward sex divide her from Nel. Her split with Nel causes Sula pain as well and reveals the differences between them:

> She had clung to Nel as the closest thing to both an other and a self, only to discover that she and Nel were not one and the same thing. She had no thought at all of causing Nel pain when she bedded down with Jude . . . . Marriage, apparently, had changed all that. (119)

Sula, having grown up in an unconventional household with no value placed on monogamy, does not view men as Nel does. Like the women of *Herland*, also unfamiliar with the

heterosexual matrix and thus women's relationships within it, Sula eschews competition between women over men; therefore, Nel's jealousy over Jude shocks and disappoints her:

> [Sula] was ill prepared for the possessiveness of the one person she felt close to. She knew well enough what other women said and felt, or said they felt. But she and Nel had always seen through them. They both knew that these women were not jealous of other women; that they were only afraid of losing their jobs. (119)

Nel's possessiveness of Jude shocks Sula, who concludes bitterly that "now Nel was one of *them*" (120). Sula's response echoes the women's reactions to the male explorers' expectations of women in *Herland*. Just as the women of Herland at first seem unwomanly to the male explorers, Sula's unconventional behavior is viewed with suspicion by her neighbors.

The nature of their relationship, though, continues to haunt both women for the rest of their lives. Indeed, as Sula dies, Nel is her last thought; even though Sula realizes the loss of her friend almost immediately, Nel does not comprehend the loss until after Sula dies. In the novel's final scene as she leaves the cemetery, Nel's sense of loss overcomes her, and she realizes that it was not Jude she had been missing for years but Sula:

> And the loss pressed down on her chest and came

> up into her throat. "We was girls together," she said as though explaining something. "Oh Lord, Sula," she cried, "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl." (174)

Nel's recollection of their shared girlhood and the powerful meaning of their friendship crystallizes in this final scene. Ultimately, then, *Sula* is both a celebration of the power of women's friendship and a lamentation for the misunderstanding and loss that women experience in our culture.

Because *Sula* enacts some of the same conflicts and presents some of the same values addressed earlier in this study, Morrison's novel shows the relevance of reading and writing about women's friendships. Like Alcott, Freeman, Wharton, and Gilman, Morrison wrote her novel during a time of tremendous social change for women, although nearly a hundred years later when women were lobbying for such volatile social issues as the Equal Rights Amendment and reproductive rights, among others. Alcott, Freeman, Wharton, and Gilman also wrote during a turbulent time for American women, and, like Morrison, their writing reflects the complexities women faced during that time. These writers' work looks toward modernism and the challenges there, while Morrison's fiction, at the end of modernism, faces similar ones.

In their introduction to *Feminist Criticism and Social Change*, Newton and Rosenfelt, recalling Lillian Robinson, remind us that feminist critics must always remember to

question the relevance of their own work. Newton and Rosenfelt (and Robinson) ask us to question the connection between "literature and therefore of literary criticism to the social and economic condition of our lives" (xv). At the end of any study, a writer should be able, or attempt, to answer that question. The similarities between *Sula* and the four works studied here suggest that such connections are worth examining, for the "social and economic conditions" of our lives continue to change and the reasons why bonds dissolve invite further examination.

The works in this dissertation demonstrate that gender, socially constructed as it is, shapes and reconfigures women characters' relationships. The depictions of friendships in Alcott's *Work*, Freeman's *A New England Nun*, Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, and Gilman's *Herland* show the uneasy relationship between characters who try--or desire--to forge homosocial bonds but who live in an evolving social world that impedes such connections. The "complex and contradictory web of relationships and loyalties," as Newton and Rosenfelt put it, accurately describes the interesting and ambivalent state of women's friendships in these works (xxvi). That such problematic alliances form speaks of the powerful forces that shape our personal relationships and tell us, as readers and critics, that women's friendship remains a provocative and important area for continued study. The one hundred or so years that separate Morrison's work

from the works of Alcott, Freeman, Wharton, and Gilman have not diminished the complexity of women's friendship in fiction. *Sula* illustrates that the characteristics of women's friendship that appeared in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American fiction still remain relevant today.

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