UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA
Edmond, Oklahoma
Jackson College of Graduate Studies

DECONSTRUCTING THE DOMESTIC SPHERE: THE AMERICAN SENTIMENTAL NOVEL AS FEMINIST METAFICTION

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
in fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH: 20TH/21ST CENTURY STUDIES

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Edmond, Oklahoma
Spring 2018

Deconstructing the Domestic Sphere:
The American Sentimental Novel as Feminist Metafiction

A THESIS

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

April 19, 2018

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair and mentor, Dr. Kate Huber, for the countless emails, hours, draft comments, and life chats that helped craft this thesis into the best version of itself and helped me become the best version of myself.

As well, a special thank you to Maisie, who was cheering us on all along and made this experience all the more special.

I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Laura Bolf-Beliveau and Dr. Timothy Petete, whose constant encouragement and guidance made my time at UCO both fruitful and memorable.

As well, I wish to thank UCO's English Department and all of its members and professors for the constant encouragement, challenges, and lessons that prepared me for all aspects of my future, both personal and professional.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends, without whom I would never be where I am today. Thank you for the prayers, the letters, the cheerleading, the vacations, and the endless amount of time and support to help me achieve my dreams.

Thanks y'all—I love y'all.

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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TITLE: Deconstructing the Domestic Sphere:

The American Sentimental Novel As Feminist Metafiction

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: Dr. Kate Huber

PAGES: 104

Since the late twentieth century, sentimental literature has seen a resurgence in literary study, with many nineteenth-century American women writers receiving critical attention for the first time. However, this attention is often focused on how these sentimental texts can be read through a modern theoretical lens, denying these texts the opportunity to be read for their own literary or sentimental value. To address this absence, I use a feminist metafictional lens to study these works within their own genre construction as cultural artifacts. In feminist metafiction, critics often question the social construction of reality and fiction to show the conflict that occurs when women are expected to fill specific gender roles, such as those established within the woman's sphere. Through analyzing Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing* (1859), Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), I argue that these feminist metafiction and sentimental novels aim to expose socially constructed genders roles for what they really are—fiction in real life—to effect change.

DECONSTRUCTING THE DOMESTIC SPHERE:

THE AMERICAN SENTIMENTAL NOVEL AS FEMINIST METAFICTION

INTRODUCTION

"America is now wholly given over to a d****d mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash—and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed. What is the mystery of these innumerable editions of *The Lamplighter*, and other books neither better nor worse? Worse they could not be, and better they need not be, when they sell by the hundred thousand."

—Nathaniel Hawthorne, in a letter to his publisher (*Sensational Designs* 228n5).

It seems ironic how pervasive Nathaniel Hawthorne's critique of American sentimental women writers has been in the history of domestic criticism, as his now-infamous description often makes an appearance in research related to sentimentality.[1] Nineteenth-century critics praised these domestic works for their morals and lessons, while writers like Hawthorne felt frustration in their inability to be recognized to the same degree; however, as the sentimental genre lost its popularity later in the nineteenth century, many critics began to recognize Hawthorne's words as prophetic, and the once-frustrated writer who felt to be largely overlooked by society is now among the canonical authors studied today. As Jane Tompkins, author of *Sensational Designs*, notes:

> Reading the scattered criticism of popular domestic novels led me to recognize—though I am certainly not the first to have done so—that the popularity of novels by women has been held against them almost as much as their preoccupation with "trivial" feminine concerns. And this led to the observation, again not original with me, that popular fiction, in general, at least since the middle of the nineteenth

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[1] As Jane Tompkins notes, the comment was "clearly the product of Hawthorne's own feelings of frustration and envy" and "comes embedded in a much-quoted passage that has set the tone for criticism of sentimental fiction ever since" (*Sensational Designs* 228n5).

> century, has been rigorously excluded from the ranks of "serious" literary works.[2] (13)

Early studies of sentimental literature thus solidified the "scribbling women" cliché, believing popular domestic novels to be exactly what Hawthorne declared these texts to be—"trash"—and thereby not worth being deemed literature in the canonical sense.

It was not until the late twentieth century that a resurgence of studies surrounding these sentimental writers took place. Helen Papashvily was the first critic to notice sentimental fiction for its potentially subversive prose, stating these texts to be "a witches' broth, a lethal draught brewed by women and used by women to destroy their common enemy, man" (qtd. in Goshgarian 10). Her rather potent analysis led the way for late-twentieth century critics to study sentimental fiction in a new and often more positive light, with feminist and literary scholars such as Ann Douglas, Nina Baym, Mary Kelley, and Jane Tompkins paving the way towards understanding and even appreciating sentimental fiction in literary study.[3] Instead of seeing "a damned mob of scribbling women" as a symbol of American low culture, these critics and many more sought to explore the value of sentimental texts within American literary study.

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[2] Alexander Cowie's attitude towards sentimentality can be regarded as most reflective of these dismissive types of comments; in *The Rise of the American Novel* Chapter X, "The Domestic Sentimentalists and Other Popular Writers" (1948), Cowie defines the domestic novel as "an extended prose tale composed chiefly of commonplace household incidents and episodes casually worked into a trite plot involving the fortunes of characters who exist less as individuals than as carriers of moral and religious sentiment" (413). In *To Kiss the Chastening Rod* (1992), G.M. Goshgarian notes that "Cowie's remains the majority opinion, at least if one counts all those who pause over the scribblers just long enough to type them as professional apologists for prevailing social arrangements" (10).

[3] Some foundational texts surrounding sentimentality's resurgence in literary and cultural study would be Ann Douglas' *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977), Nina Baym's *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America 1820-1870* (1978), Mary Kelley's *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (1984), and Jane Tompkins' *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (1985).

Yet, while these scholars have worked to understand and even defend sentimentality against modern readers' misperceptions of the domestic novel, Hawthorne's complaint continues to pervade sentimental studies. The term "scribbling women" once dismissively described these women writers, but the term has now become an ironic nod to the past. By using Hawthorne's complaint not to echo what he said but to understand why he said it, modern critics are able to explore the power sentimental fiction once held in American society and the limitations that can occur when texts are read through a single lens. While Hawthorne sought to achieve the same level of popularity as his contemporaries, he largely felt frustrated by society's attempts to pigeon-hole his narratives into the popular sentimental genre and evaluate it by those standards.[4] However, Hawthorne's works became canonical because literary critics continued to study his texts through a variety of lenses, deriving from them multiple interpretations. The same cannot be said of sentimental fiction. As time has passed, sentimental fiction has struggled in its resurgence into modern society, and until recent decades, literary scholars have pigeon-holed sentimental fiction into a singular definition. The lesson that can be learned from Hawthorne's "scribbling" comment is one that today's literary critics can continue to explore—just as Hawthorne's texts can be understood from a variety of perspectives, so too can sentimental fiction be studied as more than the single narrative earlier scholars labeled it to be.

Through a feminist metafictional lens, my work pushes beyond that singular narrative boundary to discuss the nuanced perspectives these women held about their society. Being popular cultural artifacts, these sentimental texts sought to provide an awareness about the realities and fictions that permeated nineteenth-century American culture. Many recent scholars have worked to affirm the literary and cultural values of these sentimental texts, but these studies often wish to explore these texts through a secondary field of research. The sentimental novel is argued as valuable, but it is deemed valuable for its ability to be read through a modern theoretical lens and not because of its sentimentality. My focus is to study the value of these texts as sentimental. While I am using a feminist metafictional lens to analyze these texts, this theory's emphasis on language and genre construction allows me to explore how these women writers utilize the sentimental genre to deconstruct their reader's understanding of her domestic reality. Instead of interpreting these texts through a modern lens of what literature can or should be, these texts provide more understanding of nineteenth-century American culture when analyzed through the genre in which they were written. By reading sentimental novels in this way, our understanding of sentimental literature can be widened to better represent all works of domestic fiction. Rather than reaffirm modern scholars' current perspective of sentimentality, I argue that our current understanding of sentimental literature is too restrictive to equally define all domestic fiction, particularly in regard to the variety of themes and cultural works these texts present to their nineteenth-century readers that are not encapsulated in the "sentimental" definition we see perpetuated in literary study.

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[4] See Jane Tompkins' *Sensational Designs*, Chapter I: "Masterpiece Theater: The Politics of Hawthorne's Literary Reputation" for an in-depth study into why Hawthorne's stories received less recognition during his own life as compared to today.

Construction of the Woman's Sphere

As Nancy F. Cott notes in her domestic history *The Bonds of Womanhood* (1977), the rise of industrialism during the nineteenth century created a large transition in American work, impacting women's roles more than any other social or cultural factor;

society removed traditional men and women's work from the home and into the factory, but only men saw a progression into the public's industrial sphere while women were forced to remain at home (36). By disbanding the unity of men and women's work under a single roof, the public "male sphere" and private "woman's sphere" were born, and with them came the expectation that while men would fulfill their working roles in the public, women would abandon their former ways of life and become what society asked of them.[5] In both society and genre, reality and fiction, a woman's role at home became defined as the loving, patient, and dutiful wife and mother whose moral compass would inspire her family's upbringing and comfort her husband upon return from the public sphere (xvii). To aid society in the establishment of these expectations, the woman's sphere became "embodied in the discourse of domesticity" through domestic texts such as manuals, letters, pamphlets, and more, each promoting a dominant ideal of what women's roles at home should be (xvii). These early nineteenth-century domestic texts became a foundation for the hegemonic woman's sphere to take shape. Bonding reality and fiction together, these domestic works attempted to teach moral lessons to society's women about how to fulfill this ideal role, and soon this role became society's expectation of all women as the norm.

The pressures that came from a woman's society reveal that the idea of true womanhood is nothing more than a social construction, and it is the sentimental novel that best recognizes this construction. This idea of true womanhood became an expectation “by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society” (Welter 152).[6] When analyzing this sentimental narrative through a postmodern lens, we can begin to see this constructed role as a fictional ideal placed upon society by society. This role of wife and mother did not naturally exist within the lives of every woman in American culture; it was a role society desired its women to uphold and established the woman’s sphere in order to make that role the norm. While many critics see sentimental fiction as a product that reaffirmed society’s expectations of the woman’s sphere, these sentimental texts can also be seen as artifacts that questioned the woman’s sphere from which they were born. Sentimental fiction, when explored outside of its modern misperception as upholding the idea of true womanhood, can be seen as an opportunity for women writers to recognize and question not only society around them, but the female role within that society. This self-awareness of society’s social construction reveals sentimental fiction’s proto-relationship with postmodern theory. While earlier critics saw sentimental fiction as reaffirming society’s construction, postmodern theory allows us to view sentimental fiction as doing the opposite; suddenly, instead of reaffirming the expectations of the woman’s sphere, these texts can be read as a self-aware or even subversive genre that recognizes in its writing the social construction of fiction as influenced by the social construction of reality.

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[5] For more information about the origin and formation of these two social spheres during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see Nancy F. Cott's *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835*, specifically Chapter 1, titled "Work."

To understand this postmodern self-awareness within sentimental fiction, I will establish first a working definition of feminist metafiction by breaking down feminist metafiction into its two parts—postmodern metafictional theory and feminist theory. By deconstructing feminist metafiction and reviewing its parts, I will be able to emphasize the idea that reality is a social construct as presented in these sentimental texts through their use of language and genre conventions and their focus on society's gender roles.

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[6] For an in-depth discussion of “true womanhood,” see Barbara Welter’s “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860” (1966).

Postmodern Theory and Metafiction

Metafiction is a postmodern concept that gained popularity during the later twentieth century. Originally coined by William H. Gass in "Philosophy and the Form of Fiction" (1970),[7] metafiction became much more prominent following the foundational work of Robert Scholes, Linda Hutcheon, and Patricia Waugh; as one of metafiction's foundational texts, Waugh's *Metafiction: the Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984) became a canonical text for postmodern studies and is frequently cited for its approachable definition of metafiction:

> *Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (2)

What makes this definition influential to this study is both its description of metafictional writing as "self-conscious" and also, as my research heavily focuses on, its ability to see metafiction as a way of blurring the lines between fiction and reality to see where the supposed binary overlaps. This fluidity between fiction and reality deconstructs the typical signifier-signified relationship through society's collective behavior—by viewing reality as fiction, a message presented to the reader through literature, the reader's perception of reality deconstructs (4).[8] Similarly, metafiction can also be considered as an oppositional relationship between the langue and the parole. By associating the langue with society's expectations of genre, we can see a specific novel as self-aware by how it presents its own text (the parole) within the parameters of that genre (11). By altering a reader's expectations of the language system (langue/genre) through an individual speech act (parole/text), metafiction disrupts conventional genre and brings an awareness to the reader that what she is reading is fiction.

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[7] Gass uses the term metafiction for the first time during his discussion of experimental fiction: "Indeed, many of the so-called antinovels are really metafictions" (25).

Looking at the novels chosen for this study as representatives of the sentimental genre, an initial reading presents traditional structures of genre convention; however, at the same time that sentimentality is presented, the authors are also discussing the expectations society places on all women by means of these sentimental conventions. Metafictional theory relies on the idea that fiction and reality are both social constructs influenced by society to promote expectations over its members. Through texts that expose themselves as works of fiction, readers can begin to see real life, which these texts supposedly represent, as a construction as well. In this way, sentimental works rely heavily on the balance of the familiar and unfamiliar—the traditional expectations placed on genre with the questioning of these genre conventions—in order to successfully create awareness of sentimental fiction and sentimental reality as social constructions and the fictional expectations of women presented in both (Waugh 12).[9]

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[8] From Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*: "In fact, every means of expression used in society is based, in principle, on collective behavior or—what amounts to the same thing—on convention" (68). For a breakdown of Saussure's definitions of signifier and signified, see *Course in General Linguistics*, "Part One."

Feminism and Femininity

By understanding fiction and reality as social constructs, a correlation between metafiction and feminism becomes clear; similar to how metafiction blurs the binary between fiction and real life, feminist theory explores the idea of gender roles as a social construction, not a natural one. Through gender performativity, the individual takes on the expectations of his or her specific gender role—expectations established in society, not individually—and performs that role to be accepted by society.[10] When viewing nineteenth-century American culture through this gender-constructed lens, we are presented with another binary established by society between the public male sphere and the private female sphere, a binary constructed according to society rather than occurring naturally.

However, rather than dismiss sentimentality as attempting to reaffirm this binary between gender roles, feminist metafiction reveals how the sentimental era saw gender roles as a social construct, one that could be altered according to the individual. In Cott's historical breakdown of the sentimental era, she explores how the female role in the woman's sphere was continually influenced by society—religious leaders expected women to instill morals in their children in an era where churches felt threatened by decreased attendance; businesses and industrialists, upon transitioning women's work from the home into factories, stripped women of their previous roles and forced them into new domestic ones; and public educators, seeing the value of women as teachers, began altering the woman's sphere to include education as a proper female occupation, emphasizing women's nurturing roles to include the upbringing of children not only at home, but at schools as well.[11] In each of these instances, the female identity was altered according to the needs of society, not the needs of women, and women's roles became more and more performative.

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[9] As Waugh explains further regarding the balance of the familiar and unfamiliar, "such novels can thus initially be comprehended through the old structures, and can therefore be enjoyed and remain in the consciousness of a wide readership which is given a far more active role in the construction of the 'meaning' of the text than is provided either in contemporary realist novels or in novels which convert their readers into frenetic human word-processors, and which 'last' only as long as it takes to read them" (14).

[10] For more information about gender performativity, see Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. A similar argument is made in Diana Fuss' "Reading Like a Feminist": "Retaining the idea of women as a class, if anything, might help remind us that the sexual categories we work with are no more and no less than social constructions, subject-positions subject to change and to historical evolution" (590).

Building off the idea of gender as performative, the feminist exploration of "femininity" furthers my focus on social construction. As Toril Moi notes, femininity represents the socially-constructed version of what being a female means in reality: "patterns of sexuality and behavior imposed by cultural and social norms" that patriarchal societies use to enforce "social standards" of what being feminine means under the guise that these standards are natural for all women (122-123). Feminists working within the patriarchy break down these expectations and show that, "though women undoubtedly are female, this in no way guarantees that they will be feminine," thereby questioning why society needs a standard definition of femininity at all (123). What is important here is the reaffirmation that the standard feminine, or what it means to be a woman, is entirely a social construct and is purely connected to gender. Women can either alter who they are to fill this gendered role or fall short of society’s expectations, being considered unfeminine or not a true woman in their failure. During the nineteenth-century’s era of gendered spheres, this pressure to perform only increased as acceptance within society became bound to one’s success in fulfilling society’s expectations.

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[11] For more details on religious influences, see Cott Chapter 4 "Religion," pp. 126-159; for details on industrial/economic influences, see Chapter 1 "Work," pp. 19-62; and for details on educational influences, see Chapter 3 "Education," pp. 101-125.

This pressure to perform, however, does not make these gender roles become natural; in fact, the opposite occurs. Quoting Nietzsche in her work, Butler connects the idea of performative roles to fiction, noting how the person fulfilling the role is simply a “fiction” added to the role (25).[12] The person performing that role is not making it a reality, but rather the role is forcing that person into a fictional state of being. In each aspect where society alters women’s roles—religion, education, economy, etc.—society is establishing a fictional role with the expectation that women will fill it in real life. This expectation does not make these roles natural—they do not become the result of biological reality— but rather the roles force women to abandon who they are and take on a fictional persona, often resulting in frustration or failure. Connecting this desire to my study, the construction of the woman’s sphere blurs the line between fiction and reality, and while many of these women sought to take on this ideal feminine role, they did so understanding that the role they were fulfilling was simply a societal fiction.

Feminist Metafiction

As a unification of these two theoretical frameworks, feminist metafiction questions the fictionality of reality’s social construction while addressing the absence of women writers in metafictional criticism. Gayle Greene explores the possibilities metafiction can provide feminism through feminist metafiction, believing it to be "a powerful tool of feminist critique, for to draw attention to the structures of fiction is also to draw attention to the conventionality of the codes that govern human behavior, to reveal how such codes have been constructed and how they can therefore be changed" (1-2). In feminist metafiction, also called metafictional feminist writing, critics often question the social construction of reality and fiction to show the conflict that occurs when women are expected to fill these gender roles. Thus, feminist metafiction aims for a renaming or a re-vision of society and its expectations, resulting in literature that exposes socially constructed genders roles for what they really are—fiction in real life—to effect change.

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[12] As explained in Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, quoting Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals*: “‘there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything’” (25).

Feminist metafiction became a prominent theoretical approach during the 1970s, with literary critics addressing voices that were largely absent from metafictional studies during this time. A common concern about metafictional critics like Waugh is their focus on contemporary works and, even more restrictive, a repetition of authors. John Barth, Robert Coover, Raymond Federman, Italo Calvino, Doris Lessing, Donald Barthelme, William H. Gass, and more are common authors associated with metafictional writing, providing strong metafictional examples but narrowing the field to a predominantly male authorship. While I understand that many of these foundational metafictional theorists were writing prior to the feminist restoration movement,[13] the lack of women writers is still a notable absence in much metafictional criticism. Furthermore, while one can argue that Waugh explores Laurence Sterne's sentimental novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristam Shandy, Gentleman* (1759) and its relation to metafictional parody, this is also the closest Waugh gets to looking at sentimentality before progressing forward into nineteenth-century realism;[14] upon closer study, the word "sentimental" never appears in her text. Sentimental fiction remains largely absent from the metafictional conversations taking place during this time, and it is this gap in research that my study will begin to address by reading these sentimental texts as metafiction.

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[13] Jane Tompkins and, to a degree, Elaine Showalter were largely involved in recognizing the lack of female authors being studied and calling for the opening of the literary canon to include those lost voices. Their works have been included in the Works Cited and Works Consulted pages of the introduction.

The goal of my research is to address the missing voices that metafictional theory has yet to fully explore, particularly the female voice that was most evident in sentimental fiction. Feminist metafiction does well to address the absence of women writers in metafictional studies by focusing on authors such as Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble, Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, Gail Godwin, Erica Jong, and Margaret Laurence, to name a few, but I believe that this theoretical approach can also apply to texts that predate these contemporary female writers. My study's focus on sentimental fiction will provide another example of past female voices who are utilizing feminist metafiction prior to its claimed late twentieth-century induction into literary criticism. My choice texts—Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing* (1859), Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868)—not only represent nineteenth-century American writers but also women writers and, most notably absent from this criticism, sentimental writers. By studying these nineteenth-century texts through a feminist metafictional lens, I can widen our current understanding of sentimentality, which has often been defined as an antithesis to today's feminist culture while including sentimental literature in current postmodern metafictional research.

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[14] In the few moments where she speaks of nineteenth-century fiction generally, the language used implies that these works are arguably not complex enough to be metafictional: "Although the intrusive commentary of nineteenth-century fiction may at times be metalingual (referring to fictional codes themselves), it functions mainly to aid the readerly concretization of the world of the book by forming a bridge between the historical and the fictional worlds. It suggests that the one is merely a continuation of the other, and it is thus not metafictional" (Waugh 32).

Sentimental fiction needs revisiting, as it is not the archaic American culture that today's society believes it to be. Nineteenth-century women writers, especially sentimental writers, are often pigeon-holed into an oversimplified expectation of everything sentimental and are prematurely dismissed; I see that this critical choice is also a repetition of the very problem my research addresses. In nineteenth-century sentimentality, women were expected to perform a single gender role that society constructed in reality through fiction; in the same way, critics have addressed sentimentality often as performing a specific role in American literary history. But neither is a single narrative.

I believe Jane Tompkins says it best in her article "Me and My Shadow" when she addresses the concern of separating men and women, logic and emotion, into gender roles and its effects on academic society: "The political problem…is this: to adhere to the conventions is to uphold a male standard of rationality that militates against women being recognized as culturally legitimate sources of knowledge. To break with the conventions is to risk not being heard at all" (170-171). The sentimental writers I am studying had three choices: to adhere to the socially constructed expectations of their gender and genre and continue writing sentimental fiction to reaffirm those expectations, to break with that constructed convention and write outside of the familiar (potentially losing their audience), or to find a balance between the two. That balance is best found through feminist metafiction.

The sentimental writers I explore relied on familiar sentimental conventions being present in their work in order to question those very conventions. By assuming sentimental fiction has a definitive structure as established during the early nineteenth century, critics are missing out on seeing the growth sentimental fiction had during this period and the progressive step forward these texts made when it came to deconstructing gender roles and society's expectations of women. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing*, Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig*, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* each have been studied as sentimental texts, but each defies the expected sentimental narrative in its own way. Out of all the sentimental novels that exemplify feminist metafiction, I chose these four texts because they were published towards the end of sentimental fiction's popularity, which began to decline after the Civil War. Because these texts were written by women who grew up reading popular domestic fiction and living within society's gendered expectations, these texts represent the culmination of society's sentimental ideology and sentimental genre.

First, my study into Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing* will explore the narrative conventions Stowe plays with in the construction of her novel; as a dual and dialogic narrative that provides a collective voice for women, *The Minister's Wooing* is able to widen society's understanding of women's role from its previously restrictive expectations. Then, by focusing on Wilson's *Our Nig* and Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, I will discuss how the choice these women made of writing their autobiographies as both slave narratives and sentimental fictions exemplifies their understanding of society as a social construct, an understanding that was gained through their experiences and exposed to the reader through their fiction. Finally, I will conclude with Alcott's *Little Women* by exploring the idiosyncrasy of women's roles and how, through parallels between the March girls' and Alcott's writings and lives, there is a postmodern approach to sentimental fiction that can redefine how we understand sentimentality in today's society while deconstructing the binary between fiction and reality.

Sentimental fiction brings the past into the present by using the familiar to introduce the unfamiliar. By focusing on the social constructions of fiction, reality, and women's roles, I will show how these texts exemplify the need for a wider understanding of the sentimental narrative. When reading sentimentality outside of its previously limited definition, sentimental literature becomes more than a total acceptance of the female role during the nineteenth century. It becomes something contemporary readers can empathize with in the twenty-first century where society is still socially constructed. By recognizing these nineteenth-century American texts as creating societal awareness in their readers, their messages become even more insightful to a modern reader than what was previously believed.

CHAPTER ONE

Between Writer and Reader: A Deconstructive Dialogue in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing*

"But have patience with us; for we can write only as we are driven, and never know exactly where we are going to land."

—narrator, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing*, p. 18

When looking at the spectrum of sentimental fiction during the nineteenth century, Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing* (1859) is published relatively late, her *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851) having been serialized almost a decade earlier. Sentimental fiction's popularity peaked between 1820 and 1860, so although Stowe's canonical text *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is considered a hallmark of the sentimental genre, Stowe herself wrote very late into the nineteenth century, past the supposed prime of domestic fiction. However, this gap of time between Stowe's first and third novels allows us to see her later works as influenced by her previous successes and by the sentimental genre in general. Growing up under the influence of sentimentality, Stowe and her writing sets the tone for this study by affirming the impact that earlier sentimental novels had on later texts, particularly when those texts were written by women who had grown up reading domestic fiction. By providing a collection of female voices both inside and outside of the text to influence its narrative progression, *The Minister's Wooing* provides the reader an opportunity to see society's expected women's roles as fiction and, by doing so, creates an opportunity for the reader to gain agency over her own role.

Compared to her earlier works, Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing* did not receive the same amount of critical attention as her previous novels. The majority of Stowe's critical scholarship focuses on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, whose antislavery rhetoric was said to have sparked the flames of the American Civil War. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is recognized by scholars for its political success and larger social commentary, but, overall, very few critics praise it for its sentimentality. It was not until the late twentieth century that Stowe's novel received critical attention for its domesticity, with Jane Tompkins claiming *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to be "the *summa theologica* of nineteenth-century America's religion of domesticity, a brilliant redaction of the culture's favorite story about itself—the story of salvation through motherly love" (*Sensational Designs* 125). At this critical shift, scholars began to recognize the power in Stowe's writing beyond its abolitionist rhetoric, and soon her name became canonized alongside Hawthorne, Emerson, and Melville as one of the great nineteenth-century American writers.

Following in Tompkins' footsteps, my focus on *The Minister's Wooing* derives from the same foundation—while this novel has been overshadowed by the popularity and social commentary of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it too discusses "America's religion of domesticity" through a metafictional lens and uses the sentimental genre to do so. Serialized in the *Atlantic Monthly* from 1858 to 1859, *The Minister's Wooing* was "an immediate success," earning praise from Charles Dickens, John Ruskin, and George Eliot (then Mary Ann Evans), with Lady Byron finding "more power in these few numbers than in any of [her] former writings" (S. Harris xxi). The novel tells the story of Mary Scudder, the dutiful daughter who is persuaded to marry a fictionalized version of Dr. Samuel Hopkins, the noted Calvinist theologist, while loving James Marvyn, a voyaging sailor whose religious standing is more uncertain. Set as a regional history of New

England during the late 1700s, the novel is considered a work of sentimental fiction and, just like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was widely popular when it was first published.

Unlike *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, though, *The Minister's Wooing* received little critical attention by early twentieth-century scholars; while these critics sought to define American literature "in terms of the Calvinist legacy," Stowe's writing was dismissed from the conversation because she treated such religious concerns and social issues "humorously or sentimentally" (S. Harris xxi). Because many critics from the 1940s and 1950s believed her writing to be missing key "literary" qualities, Stowe's works outside of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were largely dismissed from American literary criticism until the 1980s when second-wave feminist scholars brought about a resurgence of previously overlooked women writers (Klein 135).[15] Critics began to rediscover Stowe's collection of works beyond *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, with *The Minister's Wooing* receiving attention for both its religious and feminist perspectives.[16]

On the surface, *The Minister's Wooing* covers a religious historical transition Stowe experienced personally. Lyman Beecher, Stowe's father, was a well-known Congregationalist minister who raised Stowe under his theological beliefs, and her historical characters such as Jonathan Edwards and his grandson Aaron Burr, his student Dr. Samuel Hopkins, and Ezra Stiles were "part of the extended New England 'family' to which the Beechers belonged" (S. Harris xi). However, Stowe's novel, as many critics have discovered, "is in many ways a record of her generation's struggle with its religious legacies," as the strict values belonging to the Calvinist theology were slowly questioned and abandoned during the late eighteenth century (xi). As a writer familiar with this transition away from Puritan beliefs and towards this new, more individual religious experience, Stowe still saw from this historical transition "material sufficient to forge a collective sense of identity, a shared memory of the past bringing coherence to a future-oriented, democratized society" (Tang 86).[17] Stowe's work helps her readers understand the transition in American culture by promoting a moment in the past in order to help her readers make sense of the present.

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[15] For examples of sentimentality's and Stowe's early dismissals, see Cowie's *The Rise of the American Novel* (1948) pp. 412-446 for his discussion of various sentimental writers and pp. 447-463 for his discussion of Stowe, or Gerould's *The Patterns of English and American Fiction* (1942) on pp. 333-336.

[16] For early scholarship, see Lawrence Buell's "Rival Romantic Interpretations of New England Puritanism," Joan D. Hedrick's "'Peaceable Fruits': The Ministry of Harriet Beecher Stowe," and John Gatta's "Calvinism Feminized: Divine Matriarchy in Harriet Beecher Stowe." Later articles, such as those by Hedrick, Schultz, and Harris, are also worth exploring in terms of religion and feminist perspectives. See Works Consulted below for a detailed list or "Suggestions for Further Reading" in Susan K. Harris' "Introduction."

In the same way, a parallel can be made between this eighteenth-century theological transition and the sentimental transition occurring in the mid-nineteenth century. By this time, the cult of domesticity was well established, and with it came the woman's sphere and the gender binary between what was expected of men and women in society. *The Minister's Wooing* breaks down that binary, allowing female readers an opportunity to understand and question the sentimental legacy under which they were indoctrinated. Because of Stowe's publication history and her reliance on the sentimental genre, *The Minister's Wooing* is largely considered a sentimental work, and rightfully so. Set in the domestic sphere, the novel largely takes place within the kitchens, parlor rooms, and bedrooms of various homes, with female characters dominating the narrative's actions and conversations. Mary Scudder, the young protagonist of the novel, is praised just as her mother is for her "faculty," which is "the greatest virtue" a woman can have—success in fulfilling her domestic role at home (Stowe 4). However, at the same time that the novel uses sentimental conventions in its narrative, it presents a secondary narrative through the character Miss Prissy Diamond. Miss Prissy questions the expectations of genre as presented by the narrator's story, voicing doubts similar to the reader's about how the novel should end. By giving the readers a voice in the story, this dual narrative challenges the expectations placed on the sentimental novel while giving the reader her desired ending, thereby allowing her to experience an agency that the woman's sphere often limited through expected gender roles.[18]

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[17] For scholarship concerning the theological transition in Stowe's works, see Tang's "Making Declarations of Her Own: Harriet Beecher Stowe as New England Historian."

The Dual Narrative: The Narrator and Miss Prissy Diamond

The Minister's Wooing presents itself as a work of metafiction through the way in which it is published; as Stowe submitted the serialized excerpts of her novel to the *Atlantic Monthly*, a popular periodical, she often structured her writing as a response to a fellow columnist's content. Dorothy Z. Baker's "Harriet Beecher Stowe's Conversation with the *Atlantic Monthly*: The Construction of *The Minister's Wooing*" presents this written communication in detail, noting how because of the close proximity between the two columns, Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing* and Oliver Wendell Holmes' column "The Professor at the Breakfast-Table" responded to the political, social, and religious commentary that the other had discussed the previous month, thereby creating an open conversation between the two columns that engaged the reader with contemporary societal concerns (27-28). Being raised by a father who tested Stowe's rhetorical skills alongside her brothers, Stowe understood the power of language when it came to controversial and societal concerns, so her literary craft often took on a reflective rhetorical tone when it came to discussing contemporary issues (34). Baker's article largely focuses on the construction of Stowe's novel and the continued conversation that serialized publications allowed, presenting a number of examples of the ways in which the two columns communicated over time.

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[18] Susan K. Harris makes a similar point in her introduction to *The Minister's Wooing* about the novel being an attempt to destabilize society's dominating ideals, but she doesn't address how this destabilization is related to society outside of the limitations of the text. See Harris, "Introduction."

When seen through a postmodern lens, Baker's discussion concerning narrative construction can be read as Stowe's attempts to expose her reader to the dialogic capabilities of a text, particularly a work of fiction, as presented in her own conversations with Holmes. This dialogic narrative works to create a dialogue about society's concerns and "displays and rejoices in the impossibility" of finding a resolution to these problems (Waugh 6).[19] Rather than argue a single solution for society's concerns, Stowe's continued conversation with Holmes' text displays both authors' understanding of how a single solution limits the possibilities of a society becoming aware of itself through these larger conversations. By presenting her fiction as dialogic alongside other texts, Stowe allows the reader to become aware of the discourses taking place in their reality, discourses that, as Stowe and Holmes' suggest through their ongoing conversation, do not have a fixed solution or perspective.

Further, alongside writing her novel as dialogic with other publications, the construction of Stowe's narrative presents an open dialogue between her text and her reader. *The Minister's Wooing* begins by informing the reader that "Mrs. Katy Scudder had invited Mrs. Brown, and Mrs. Jones, and Deacon Twitchel's wife to take tea with her on the afternoon of June second, A.D. 17—" (Stowe 3). As Baker notes, just as the novel begins with this "formulaic social announcement" that would often appear in local papers, the narrator quickly abandons her story to contemplate the "difficulty of narrative construction," positing that beginning in such a way will "provoke questions, and thus initiate a conversation of sorts with the reader" (Baker 27). The narrator utilizes the traditional genre conventions provided to her, but just as quickly, she "completely alters her narrative strategy to demonstrate publicly that there exist alternatives to this well-worn convention of prose construction" (32).

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[19] As referenced in Waugh's text, the dialogic derives from Mikhail Bakhtin's theoretical work. See p. 6.

This concern for narrative construction coincides with the metafictional discussion concerning the "arbitrary nature of beginnings" (Waugh 29); by questioning the narrative's construction and what is expected of its genre from the first sentence, the reader is invited into the conversation concerning the construction of fiction. No longer a passive observer, the reader is more invested in the narrative as she begins to recognize and deconstruct its structuring. Once the artifice of fiction is laid out to the reader, the reader gains an awareness of the relationship between life and fiction, a relationship that exposes life not as fixed but as something that can be altered over time (4). The involvement of the reader in Stowe's work becomes crucial to the metafictional aspects of her fiction; beyond conversing with other texts, *The Minister's Wooing* converses with the reader herself, declaring the narrator and the reader to "have joint concern in the further unfolding of our story" (Stowe 10). The story no longer becomes the narrator's alone to tell—the unification of the narrator and reader into a first-person plural allows the reader to feel agency over what happens and invests her in the construction of their narrative.

This dialogic becomes most clear in the dual narratives present in the novel, one depicting sentimental conventions from the narrator, the other deriving from the reader through her own voice and the voice of Miss Prissy Diamond. The narrator begins by writing the first narrative, incorporating the genre conventions that are expected in sentimental fiction. The narrator explains to the reader that, “strictly speaking, it is necessary to begin with the creation of the world, in order to give a full account of anything;” in fulfilling this expected convention of world building, the narrator introduces the novel’s female characters, describing the life of Mrs. Katy Scudder and her daughter Mary Scudder as the women of their community come together for tea (Stowe 11). Set in the domestic woman’s sphere with its cast of female characters, the narrator establishes the narrative as sentimental and conventionally familiar.

However, while using these standard conventions to begin her narrative, the narrator admits explicitly the difficulties that come with constructing such a narrative. While she feels pressure to begin her novel a specific way, the narrator admits it never feels like a proper beginning—there is always something that came before this moment that is important, or there is another character to introduce to the readers. Admitting these frustrations from the beginning, the narrator asks for patience, “for we can write only as we are driven, and never know exactly where we are going to land” (Stowe 18). Up to this point, the narrator has been crafting her story alone, but here she admits to the reader that her narrative is open to alteration and that, because of her reader’s involvement, the story’s plot is not already laid out. Through its serialized form of publication, *The*

Minister's Wooing offers its readers the opportunity to respond to the current plot progression because the ending has not been written yet. Rather than be a fixed narrative, one with a resolution of Stowe's personal creation, Stowe provides her readers a more participatory role in the narrative's construction, a role that allows her to alter the narrative's progression as she desires, even if that alteration diverts from sentimental conventions.

As the narrative progresses forward and introduces Mary Scudder's romantic interests—Dr. Samuel Hopkins, the Calvinist minister, and James Marvyn, her childhood friend—there comes a time when the narrator reconvenes with the reader's expectations, going so far as to stop the plot's progression in order to address the concerns of her readers about the novel up to this point:

> Will our little Mary really fall in love with the Doctor?—The question reaches us in anxious tones from all the circle of our readers; and what especially shocks us is, that grave doctors of divinity, and serious, stocking-knitting matrons seem to be the class who are particularly set against the success of our excellent orthodox hero, and bent on reminding us of the claims of that unregenerate James, whom we have sent to sea on purpose that our heroine may recover herself of that foolish partiality for him which all the Christian world seems bent on perpetuating. (Stowe 107)

The narrator expresses her surprise over her audience not rooting for the Doctor, the more pious choice, as she originally assumed they would since the woman's sphere expects women to covet piety. However, this surprise reaction is tongue-in-cheek, as the narrator teases the reader for desiring James to be the romantic hero, not the Doctor.

Understanding the society in which her readers are indoctrinated, the narrator plays with society's expectation that women prioritize piety in their lives. Thus, the narrator declares the Doctor to be "our excellent orthodox hero" while James remains an "unregenerate" whom the narrator purposefully sent away in order to simultaneously fulfill society's expectation and undermine it with her tongue-in-cheek tone.

Moreover, despite her questioning of the reader's expectations, the narrator never disagrees with her reader's wishes, allowing her to participate in the narrative's construction. "No,—spite of all you may say and declare," she notes to the readers who share their doubts over the narrator's decision, "we do insist that our Doctor is a very proper and probable subject for a young lady to fall in love with," but the narrator never admits that he is the right or only choice for Mary Scudder (Stowe 107-108). She reassures her readers that the Doctor is an excellent choice according to the genre's expected conventions, but in maintaining the dialogic of her narrative, she also implies that he is not the only choice that can be made nor is he the choice her readers desire the most.

Even as Mary accepts the Doctor's marriage proposal and stands firm in her promise despite James' return, the narrator reminds the reader that these expectations Mary feels pressure to maintain come not from herself, but from society. The narrator explains that while some readers "think it an unnatural thing that Mary should have regarded her pledge to the Doctor as of so absolute and binding force; . . . they must remember the rigidity of her education," as self-sacrifice, duty, and piety are at the heart of the domestic sphere (Stowe 294). In this view, the reader automatically understands the role Mary feels pressure to fill because it is the same role that is asked of the reader in reality. Thus, this narrative no longer remains the story of one woman, but it represents the story a group of women share. By reminding the reader of the society she lives in, the narrator blurs the line between fiction and real life, implying that while the reader lives in a society that standardizes the role women fill, she is contradicting the very values instilled through that woman's sphere by desiring a different outcome in their fictional narrative. However, this implication is never questioned nor shamed by anyone. Rather, the narrator supports the reader who feels this way because she, like Stowe, recognizes the power that comes from this type of agency, this freedom to choose the outcome of her own narrative. The narrative's construction thus remains open to the reader, whose preference of James' affections over the Doctor's becomes influential to the plot's progression.

Recognizing the power her readers have over the narrative, the narrator introduces a character into the story that provides the reader her voice within that fictional world. It is worth recognizing that the chapter where the narrator is teasing her readers about their contradictory expectations is titled "Miss Prissy," for it is through the character Miss Prissy Diamond that the reader receives a fictional voice to speak on behalf of her desires. Miss Prissy is the resident dressmaker of Newport, a swift-working and quick-witted older woman whose role is centralized in the community for the conversation and product she provides these women. Being embedded in these women's lives through both their needs for clothing and conversation, Miss Prissy proudly defines her single, or spinster, status as a choice (Stowe 112). Miss Prissy thus becomes an alternative to what is expected of women within the woman's sphere. Choosing to remain single, an act viewed as a failure by previous generations, Miss Prissy is never dismissed for her spinster lifestyle but rather is presented as a central figure within the woman's sphere present in this novel. As this central figure who also deviates from the domestic woman's role, Miss Prissy provides the reader a voice to express her desires for the narrative's construction, even desires that deviate from sentimental genre conventions.

Miss Prissy's role in the novel is both complementary and subversive to the novel's plot, for just as she is the master of her domestic craft, she is also "an alternative authority" whose mastery of gossip drives the narrative's plot in an alternative direction (Schultz 40).[20] Up to this point when Mary is engaged to the Doctor, Miss Prissy has gone through the narrative with little complaint—she goes about her daily work admiring the women's gowns, lives, and relationships—but as a person in tune with the feelings of those around her, Miss Prissy never doubts that the love between James and Mary will always be stronger than the love between Mary and the Doctor. Miss Prissy, recognizing James and Mary's love:

> . . . had her heart somewhat touched . . . by a true love-story, and had hinted something of her feelings to Mrs. Scudder, in a manner which brought such a severe rejoinder as quite humbled and abashed her, so that she coweringly took refuge under her former declaration, that, "to be sure, there couldn't be any man in the world better *worthy* of Mary than the Doctor." (Stowe 305)

In this conversation with Mrs. Scudder, Miss Prissy voices the reader's thoughts over who Mary's love should be, but since that love does not align with what is expected of

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[20] See Nancy Lusignan Schultz's "The Artist's Craftiness: Miss Prissy in *The Minister's Wooing*" for a further exploration of Miss Prissy's character beyond her role as storyteller.

Mary by both her fictional society and the society reading this fictional work, Miss Prissy, the usual gossip, keeps her opinion to herself.

Despite her submissive appearance, however, Miss Prissy takes it upon herself to subvert from the original narrative and create hers and the readers' own version of a happy ending. After speaking with Candace, an African American slave who gains her freedom in the novel, Miss Prissy reveals that "I a'n't one, somehow, that can let things go that seem to want doing. I always told folks that I should spoil a novel before it got half-way through the first volume, by blurting out some of those things that they let go trailing on so, till everybody gets so mixed up they don't know what they're doing" (Stowe 313).[21] At this moment, Miss Prissy creates an awareness for her very function within the novel's plot: "while she is literally talking about reading other novels, what she says also applies to her own function in the novel" (Schultz 41). As representative of the reader's voice, Miss Prissy spoils the novel by altering the plot away from the expected ending and towards the reader's preferred ending. To finish "spoiling" the novel, Miss Prissy reveals to the Doctor the true feelings no one wishes to admit—that Mary loves James and not him, and as the Doctor sacrifices his own happiness for Mary to marry her true love, the narrator sees her narrative abandon its expected course and ends her story in the same chapter Dr. Hopkins ends his engagement, writing "and thus ended THE MINISTER'S WOOING" [original capitalization] (Stowe 320).

At this moment, the narrator allows Miss Prissy—and the reader—to become the lead narrators over the novel's ending. In the penultimate chapter, "The Wedding," the narrator provides the reader "more minute and graphic details than we ourselves could furnish" by allowing Miss Prissy to describe James and Mary's wedding through a letter, a literal depiction of Miss Prissy writing the narrative's ending (Stowe 321). As well, in the final chapter, the narrator admits that "it is fashionable to drop the curtain over a newly married pair" but hopes the reader may still be interested in the fates of the other characters, such as Madame de Frontignac, Candace, and Colonel Aaron Burr, whose endings are revealed through diary records, publications, and written letters (326). By allowing the reader's desires to come to fruition through Miss Prissy's meddling, Mary and James' wedding, and learning the fates of the remaining characters, the reader is given agency over the narrative's construction. The narrator is not able to present the ending because she has been working within the expectations of her genre, and while the story remains under her care, it is the reader, not the narrator, who has chosen the ending of this story; thus, it is the reader's right through Miss Prissy to complete their narrative together. By progressing beyond the happy wedding which signifies the end of so many sentimental novels, the ending further distances itself from what is expected of its sentimental plot and shifts the novel towards an alternative narrative, one both the narrator and the reader worked together to create.

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[21] Tess Chakkalakal's "Whimsical Contrasts: Love and Marriage in *The Minister's Wooing* and *Our Nig*" examines the roles of African Americans in this era and this genre through an in-depth look at Candace in her defense of freedom as a former slave and her role in initiating the happy marriage Miss Prissy enacts.

In this way, the novel exposes itself as metafiction because it focuses on creating a piece of fiction at the same time that it makes a statement about creating fiction (Waugh 6). This dual narrative—what the narrator begins and the reader ends—presents a vital dialogic that the serialization of this novel allowed as it was published. By providing the reader agency over this fictional narrative, the reader experiences an awareness that what she is reading is fiction, and as such, it is alterable according to her own design. In the same way, by allowing agency over Mary Scudder's sentimental engagement, the reader is able to experience agency over society's expectations of women in fiction and reality by altering the outcomes in each—just as this novel receives an alternative construction, so too can the reader recognize the agency she has over her own life's structure.

Blurring the Binaries: Breaking Down Gender Role Expectations

In the words of Stowe, "where theorists and philosophers tread with sublime assurance, woman often follows with bleeding footsteps;—women are always turning from the abstract to the individual, and feeling where the philosopher only thinks" (17). Whenever women read fiction, an abstract idea is interpreted through the individual—the reader is continually seeing how this fictional text relates to her own personal life, and with that action comes continual pressure to comply with societal expectations. While the first narrative begins by attempting to fulfill the expectations of sentimental fiction, the second narrative provides an alternate view of sentimental fiction as seen through the novel's female characters. The novel focuses primarily on its community of women, and while many of these women attempt to live up to society's expectations within the domestic sphere, they cannot feel successful without losing either their individuality or their happiness. Looking at Mary again, the expected sentimental heroine, it is important to note that her success as a heroine relies on her ability to deny herself, for "self-denial and self-sacrifice had been the daily bread of her life" (294). In order for her to succeed in her expected role, she must sacrifice herself and deny her love for James. To Miss Prissy and the reader, this duty that society's domestic sphere praises suddenly appears negative, an obstacle in the way of happiness that is evident when James and Mary reunite. Through the second narrative, Miss Prissy and the reader allow Mary an alternative choice to the limited role she feels obligated to fill, and in doing so provide Mary her happy ending, an ending that is both sentimental and subversive: “the fair poetic maiden, the seeress, the saint, has passed into that appointed shrine for woman…—*a Christian home*” while simultaneously choosing her own love and happiness (326). In Miss Prissy and the reader’s alternative narrative, the binary between fiction and reality is blurred, showing that the expectation of women’s roles is not as limited as society portrays it to be. The ideality of society’s expectations for its women is not the reality every woman desires to fulfill.

It is not only in Mary’s story that this revelation takes place—nearly every woman falls short of society’s expectations in her daily life. When Candace is told by the deacon of the church that “you ought to give honor to your husband; the wife is the weaker vessel,” exemplifying sentimental submissiveness and Calvinist theology, Candace scoffs at the deacon, encapsulating some women’s frustrations when they are expected to lessen themselves because of their gender: “*I* de weaker vessel? Umph!” (Stowe 105). Mrs. Marvyn, upon hearing about James’ rumored death, begins to doubt her God and lacks the piety society expects women to have, seeing predestination in its most fatalistic sense as she declares “I can never love God! I can never praise Him!—I am lost! lost! lost!” (200). Lastly, after marrying Monsieur de Frontignac, Virginie de Frontignac realizes she “didn’t *love* anybody” and struggles with remaining faithful to her husband, even going so far as to warn Mary from making the same mistake she did of marrying for the sake of her gender expectations: “it is dreadful to be married to a good man, and want to be good, and want to love him, and yet never like to have him take your hand . . . and then to think of how different it would all be, if it was only somebody else”

(224, 179). When Mary defends the expectations society indoctrinates its women to uphold, Virginie expresses the truth behind this sentimental ideal, declaring to Mary that, in attempting to meet society's construction of their lives, "oh, Mary, that is too hard! Never do it, darling!" (180). In that single statement, Virginie admits the real difficulty in fulfilling the ideal sentimental role, something she was raised and told she must do, but upon filling that role, finds it too difficult to sustain.

Almost every woman in the novel struggles with maintaining the ideal image she is expected to portray, allowing her mind to wander away from society's standardized role and towards her own individual emotions. The image of the wandering mind is consistent throughout the novel as the community of women struggle to deny themselves in the name of indoctrinated expectations. Virginie explains the phenomenon best: "I say the offices to him daily, but my heart is very wild and starts away from my words" (Stowe 227). In instances of reading, prayer, or devotion, these women fulfill their domestic role physically, but mentally they begin to doubt and wander, sinking into a daydream, reverie, or memory and not focusing on the task at hand. Even Mrs. Scudder, the maternal figure in favor of the Doctor's proposal and responsible for teaching Mary the ways of womanhood, cannot maintain her own ideals of womanhood because she allows her mind to wander away from these fictional expectations and towards her own reality: "Mrs. Scudder, after retiring to her room, took her Bible, in preparation for her habitual nightly exercise of devotion, before going to rest. She read and re-read a chapter, scarce thinking what she was reading,—roused herself,—and then sat with the book in her hand in deep thought" about the possible relationship between Mary and James (51). When Mrs. Scudder should be dutifully reading her Bible, she allows herself a moment of personal reflection rather than pious reflection, a choice that alternates away from the dominant expectation of how women should act. Each woman realizes in the novel a way in which she falls short of society's version of womanhood, and upon recognizing her own shortfall, feels unhappiness in her attempts to fill such a limited role.

And yet, the novel does not allow its community of women to remain unhappy. While Mary, Virginie, Candace, and the other women cannot fill the role expected of them perfectly, it does not mean they cannot alter that role to fit their own individual lives. Each woman's story ends with a happy ending, an ending Miss Prissy and the reader, not society's genre conventions, create. In allowing the reader through Miss Prissy to create the ending and remove the traditional plot expectations from the narrative, each woman is allowed to see both fiction and her personal life as constructions that are alterable and not resolute. The ability of readers to construct fiction makes them aware of how influential society is over fiction, and paralleling the character's lives, how influential society is over their own lives. The binary between fiction and reality becomes fluid, but with that fluidity comes the construction of an alternative, more accepting version of what a woman's role can be.

When Stowe wrote *The Minister's Wooing*, she recognized the difficulties men and women faced during the religious transition away from Calvinism, and she understood how difficult it is to follow an ideology that is both mentally demanding and restricting. By reading her novel as a dual narrative, one in which the conventional genre is simultaneously promoted and subverted by an alternative narrative that is dialogic with the reader, the reader is given a sense of agency. Just like reality, fiction is never finite—there can be no firm expectation or standard for fiction because it is continually evolving;

in the same vein, there can be no finite expectation of what role women are meant to fill. As Jane Tompkins argues about the value of sentimental fiction, “the popular domestic novel of the nineteenth century represents a monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman’s point of view;…and that, in certain cases, it offers a critique of American society far more devastating than any delivered by better-known critics such as Hawthorne and Melville” (*Sensational Designs* 124). As an example of Tompkins’ argument, *The Minister’s Wooing* offers society a critique of the finite narrative it is pushing on women from women’s point of view, a perspective constructed through the narrative’s dialogic properties. Stowe’s fiction creates an awareness of multiple realities, alternative realities that each individual constructs based on her own experiences (Waugh 89). Metafiction is constantly aware of the ties between what is fiction and what is real, and when related to the sentimental narrative, the expectations placed on sentimental fiction and on women’s roles exemplify what Forrest-Thomson defines as a “trapped” feeling: “the case of being trapped inside an outworn literary tradition may be taken as a special symptom of the feeling that we are all trapped in our systems for measuring and understanding the world” (qtd. in Waugh 61).[22] Through the choices these women made over the course of *The Minister’s Wooing* to alter the current narrative, these women are implicitly expressing a frustration felt towards being held to a firm standard of what it means to be a woman, a standard that the women recognize they did not create.

In sentimental fiction, women were expected to meet society’s ideal version of womanhood, but when this abstract idea translated into reality, many women felt themselves struggling to obtain such a high ideal. Through *The Minister’s Wooing*, Stowe allows her readers to seek an alternative narrative both in her fiction and in their reality by constructing her novel as a dialogic between the writer and reader. *The Minister's Wooing* offers an alternative ideology, one that is built out of sentimentality's expectations but allows a wider understanding of what women's roles can be through the reader's construction of the narrative's ending. This agency, when read in sentimental fiction, provides a new layer to our current understanding of sentimental fiction as providing more diversity and agency for women than previously assumed. By creating a dual narrative, Stowe introduces to the modern reader an understanding of sentimental fiction as consisting of two narratives, one which today's society expects of sentimentality, the other as an alternative narrative that allows the reader choices in a domestic sphere that has been identified as limiting. Suddenly, sentimental fiction becomes more than a single narrative for modern critics, and it is that second narrative that allows the label "sentimentality" to be widened.

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[22] In *Metafiction*, Waugh spells Veronica Forrest-Thomson’s name as Forrest-Thompson. See p. 163.

In light of the expectations placed on women to fill their domestic role, sentimental writers like Stowe understood the limitations society perpetuated through such a finite narrative for its women. Through serialized sentimental fiction, Stowe provides readers a dialogic narrative that continually changes as more voices enter the conversation about what society can become. It is not a woman's failure when she does not meet society's expectations of her woman's role, for a woman's role is not a single narrative. Through the experiences of Mary, Mrs. Scudder, Virginie, Miss Prissy, Candace, Mrs. Marvyn, and the narrator, the reader gains agency by constructing an alternative and individual version of what being a successful woman can look like; it is the reader, not society, that promotes cultural acceptance of every type of Miss Prissy society's women choose to be.

CHAPTER TWO

The Paradox of Identity Construction in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Our Nig*

“. . . we select, we construct, we compose our pasts and hence make fictional characters of ourselves as it seems we must to remain sane.”

–William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, 1971, p. 128

Until the late twentieth century, the central figure for studying nineteenth-century African American literature had been Frederick Douglass and his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), setting the standard for American slave narratives in literary study (Braxton 381).[23] However, through centralizing this piece, the voice of slavery became inherently male, as Douglass' *Narrative* “makes no attempts to define a corresponding female archetype” or feminine voice in the text (382). The African American female identity remained relatively absent from nineteenth-century literary studies as well as metafiction and feminist studies, creating a gap in our understanding of how sentimental and societal gender roles affected this group of women. That is, until the discovery of Harriet Jacobs' and, later, Harriet E. Wilson's texts. Through the recovery and reintroduction of Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Jean Fagan Yellin in the 1970s and 1980s and Wilson's *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In a Two-Story White House, North. Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There* (1859) by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in

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[23] Some may argue over William Wells Brown's influence on African American literature and the slave narrative through his piece *Clotel; Or, the President's Daughter* (1853), as it “propagandizes within the constructs of a romance” in the same way Wilson “propagandizes within the constructs of a sentimental novel” in order to discuss slavery (Mitchell 7). While Brown was born in America and, as an escaped slave himself, has ties to American culture in his novel's context, some argue that because *Clotel* was published in London, it can also be seen as a British text. Thus, it was not as central as Douglass' piece.

1982, the African American female voice emerged in America nineteenth-century literature, opening up the slave narrative genre to include female voices that gave readers a further glimpse into the reality of these women's lives (Gates Jr. vii).

As Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr. argue in their introduction to *The Slave's Narrative*, the production and publishing of slave narratives during the nineteenth century was an attempt by African Americans to craft an African American identity in a society where their identity was constructed for them. When fugitive slaves began writing of their personal experiences, these authors were attempting not just to seek retribution or sympathy from their reader, nor to only condemn the institution of slavery—they desired to establish their own identity. Davis and Gates Jr. note in their analysis of the slave narrative:

> Accused of lacking a formal and collective history, blacks published individual histories which, taken together, were intended to narrate, in segments, the larger yet fragmented history of blacks in Africa, then dispersed throughout a cold New World. The narrated, descriptive "eye" was put into service as a literary form to posit both the individual "I" of the black author, as well as the collective "I" of the race. Text created author, and black authors hope they would create, or re-create, the image of the race in European discourse. The very *face* of the race, representations of whose features were common in all sorts of writings about blacks at that time, was contingent upon the recording of the black voice. (xxvi)

The purpose of publishing slave narratives was more complex than crafting a case for abolition or understanding; while these aspects were vital in the crafting of the slave narrative, these African American authors sought most to construct an individual identity for themselves and a collective identity for their race. The desire for freedom from enslavement was not the only goal for these African American women writers; these authors also desired the freedom of autonomy over their identity.

Incidents and *Our Nig*, though, did not rely on the slave narrative genre alone to seek this autonomy. To help craft their texts as successful stories that would be shared with the masses, Jacobs and Wilson combined their slave narratives with the sentimental conventions commonly found in fiction during this time. In much of the research related to both Jacobs and Wilson, critics have noted more and more frequently the duality of these texts as both slave narrative and sentimental narrative, creating a common understanding that these texts can belong to either genre.[24] What is noticeable when reviewing this research, however, is how few of these studies begin to explore how the two genres interact with each other; as one of the closest examples, Marilyn C. Wesley notes that Jacobs' *Incidents* "is usually read as an uneasy alliance between the slave narrative and the sentimental novel: a story that yokes the hazards of virtue in one genre with the project of liberation in the other" (59).[25] My research picks up where Wesley left off by exploring how these two genres—slave narrative and sentimental narrative—

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[24] See Thomas Doherty's "Harriet Jacobs' Narrative Strategies: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" (1986); Claudia Tate's "Legacies of Intersecting Cultural Conventions" (1992); Karsten H. Piep's "'Nothing New Under the Sun': Postsentimental Conflict in Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig*" (2006); Gabrielle Foreman's "The Spoken and The Silenced in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Our Nig*" (1990); Angelyn Mitchell's "Her Side of His Story: A Feminist Analysis of Two Nineteenth-Century Antebellum Novels—William Wells Brown's *Clotel* and Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig*" (1992); Tess Chakkalakal's "Whimsical Contrasts: Love and Marriage in *The Minister's Wooing* and *Our Nig*" (2011); and Marilyn C. Wesley's "A Woman's Place: The Politics of Space in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" (1997).

[25] Wesley's article provides a comparison between the male and female aspects of Jacobs' narrative, noting the narrative to be "produced by the conflicting demands of the ideologies of femininity in which [Linda Brent] participates as well as by the 'patriarchal institution'…which she resists" (64).

interact within these texts, particularly in regard to the ways in which these women attempted to assert their identities through their shared experiences.

As noted through Davis and Gates Jr.'s work, the slave narrative genre was associated with the African American desire to construct and assert their own identity, an association that is present in both *Incidents* and *Our Nig*. However, when melded together with sentimental conventions, the real experiences of these women take on a fictional quality. When analyzed in terms of Waugh's definition of metafiction—". . . [metafictional] writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text"—these two sentimental slave narratives become more complex (2). By adapting both their personal experiences and the sentimental narrative to unite the two into one novel, Jacobs and Wilson are presenting a deeper understanding of mid-nineteenth century culture by showing the fluidity between fiction and reality.

Rather than find their autonomous true identity through the publication of their histories, Jacobs and Wilson instead craft constructed identities that still are confined within the cultural constructions of their time. Jacobs' and Wilson's use of the slave narrative genre is an attempt for them to assert authority over their own identity: if they could write their experiences down on paper, they could control the narrative of their own lives, thereby restoring autonomy over themselves. However, through their choice to construct their personal narratives using sentimental conventions, their assertion of identity becomes conflicted. Rather than recover autonomy over themselves, the use of slave narrative and sentimental narrative create a paradox: at the same time that the slave narrative genre allows these women to share their personal experiences, thus recovering their ability to construct their own identities, the sentimental conventions used within the slave narrative simultaneously deny these women their ability to construct their identity in reality. As Waugh notes:

> If, as individuals, we now occupy "roles" rather than "selves," then the study of characters in novels may provide a useful model for understanding the construction of subjectivity in the world outside novels. If our knowledge of this world is now seen to be mediated through language, then literary fiction (worlds constructed entirely of language) becomes a useful model for learning about the construction of "reality" itself. (3)

While each author desires the reader to see that her story is real, not a fiction, the moment she enters into her own narrative as the protagonist, her real identity disappears and is replaced with a role, not a self. In metafictional texts, the moment the authors "step into their fictions," they are "locked in a system of endless regress," a system that ultimately strips them of their identity in reality the moment it is presented in fiction (142-143). Thus, Wilson's and Jacobs' texts fall into an identity paradox. The moment one asserts her identity in fiction, she begins to decontextualize and destabilize her identity in reality because she is allowing society's construction of genre and gender found in sentimental fiction to define her role in her own history.

The use of sentimental conventions then becomes an admission that their entire reality, their personal, historical experiences, can be recontextualized and adapted into fiction. As a result, these women present to us a wider understanding of what we can believe nineteenth-century society to have understood about their own reality. The paradox of identity is present in both *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Our Nig*; by deconstructing these texts and seeing how their two genres interact with each other, we as contemporary readers are able to see the complexity that is nineteenth-century American reality and, as I argue, get a glimpse at how these two women, through their choice to adapt their reality into fictional terms, present an awareness that when broken down, society's reality becomes nothing more than a fictional construct exerted upon its people. Knowing this, Jacobs' and Wilson's decision to deconstruct their "selves" into fictional "roles" allows their reader to become aware of how fictional identity really is, thus questioning the fictionality of her own constructed reality. Further, while evoking sentimental sympathy in their reader by sharing the story of their injustice, Jacobs and Wilson are furthering their abolitionist cause through the metafictional questioning invoked in the reader. If reality is nothing more than a construction, the reader may begin to recognize slavery as also being constructed and, as a fictional construct, is something that can be adapted or, as Jacobs and Wilson hope, entirely deconstructed.

Asserting Autonomy over Identity in Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Looking first at Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the desire for identity is well-evident in its use of the slave narrative and sentimental genre. As the supposed sentimental heroine of Jacobs' story, Brent's desire for identity often comes in conflict with her fictional role if for no other reason than that it contradicts the submissiveness expected in the woman's sphere. Brent continually attempts to fulfill this fictional sentimental role, practicing and preaching pious teachings and desiring to remain innocent until her marriage. Following her journey through childhood into womanhood, the narrative structures itself around Brent's introduction into femininity and the domestic sphere, paralleling a similar journey shared by many sentimental heroines.

However, because this narrative is also a slave narrative, the singularity of her character as a sentimental heroine is impossible. She advises those near her to be “good and forgiving,” but even as she fills this sentimental role she is “not unconscious of the beam in [her] own eye” (Jacobs 19). The hypocrisy of her sentimental teachings lies in the fact that her role as woman conflicts with her role as slave. Yes, the desire for submissiveness is present in both roles, but while sentimentality’s submissiveness is a choice, slavery’s submissiveness is forced upon her, thus making it undesirable because it was never her choice. Because Brent is both a woman and a slave, she feels pressure to perform both signifiers at once, but she quickly finds that in order to escape her expected role as slave, she must sacrifice parts of her chosen role as a woman in order to save what remains of her individual identity. Thus, Brent’s defiance seeks to restore her identity as an individual woman of the woman’s sphere, even if that means contradicting what the woman’s sphere expects of her.

When Jacobs’ novel begins, the reader is immediately met with how identity construction is a collective effort, not an individual one: “I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away” (8). As Linda Brent grew up in her childhood home, the identification label “slave” had never entered her mind because she had never been treated as a slave. Brent grew up among her family, watching her father instill a sense of self in both of his children. In this environment, the construction of her identity began as a reflection of her parents’ identities—her father, who was a successful carpenter earning enough money and ethos to support his family outside of his mistress’s home, and her mother, who, as her mistress’s family noted, was “a slave merely in name” (10). Under the influence of her parents, Brent’s identity was constructed as a reflection of their values and sense of self; her parents were seen in the community as slaves, but they were also seen as skillful and loving people, and as Brent was not informed of her first label of "slave," she grew up choosing to believe society would recognize her as a loving and talented woman.

It was not until her mother's death that Brent began to realize that the domestic role was not meant for her; as an African American woman, her identity was not considered hers to decide. Similar to the conventional sentimental heroine, Brent loses her mother at a very young age, but it is only after her mother's death that Brent realizes she is a slave (Jacobs 10). As a piece of property, Jacobs is forced to rely on the goodness of others as she grows into womanhood; in this instance, that goodness comes from Brent's first mistress, whose kindness allows Brent to grow up with lots of sentimental teachings, sitting "by her side for hours, sewing diligently" (10). Brent continues to cling to hope through her first mistress, being treated, like her mother, as a slave only in name. However, this small kindness could not last; the moment her mistress died and left Brent as property to a niece, Brent recognized that while religious doctrine taught "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" and sentimental doctrine taught her to be an ideal woman in the domestic sphere, she was not recognized by her masters as a neighbor or as a woman, but only as property (11).

Brent's character is designed through the sentimental genre as the heroine of the story, exemplifying sentimental conventions through her tragic childhood. By establishing herself as the sentimental heroine, Jacobs evokes sympathy from her reader for Brent's fate, particularly when Brent's mother and mistress die and her hopes are crushed of ever becoming free. The reader sympathizes with Brent for her misfortunes, and in doing so, becomes more invested in the lesson Jacobs wishes to teach her reader about her experience as a slave. Jacobs' experience, as told through Linda Brent's character, presents a reality slavery instilled in both populations. The masters of these slaves believed they could construct the African American identity as one of property, thereby stripping each slave of his or her own sense of self. Any attempts for African Americans to assert autonomy through the construction of their identity, even an identity that was praised in society, was considered outside of the societal norm; in the eyes of the white majority, slaves were considered as without identity and missing the right to construct one for themselves. This is what made slavery's institution so virulent—in order to maintain societal order, society denied slaves their humanity in an effort to assert control over them, constructing a sense of property in identity's stead. By teaching this lesson about slavery through a sentimental heroine's loss and hardships, Jacobs is able to use the sentimental genre to evoke sympathy in her reader for the abolitionist cause after witnessing what Brent experienced as a child.

After establishing the freedom Brent once had as a child and stripping her of that freedom, Jacobs presents to her sympathetic reader Brent's attempts to regain autonomy over her identity as she grows into womanhood; however, as Brent quickly realizes, this desire for freedom conflicts with society's expectations of her as a woman. Despite her family unit dwindling after her parents' deaths, Brent's grandmother continues to be a source of sentimental teachings for Brent, a maternal figure whose role is to provide Brent a moral upbringing. Brent's grandmother is described as "so loving, so sympathizing," and so pious in her teachings that she represents everything society's sentimentality instills in its women (Jacobs 18). When trials come her family's way, the grandmother continually tells her children to put their trust in God and be humble and submissive to their masters, understanding that sentimental teachings were valuable to becoming a successful woman and a successful, and thus surviving, slave (22). Earning her freedom through her hard work in the domestic sphere by cooking, the grandmother becomes the mistress over her own domestic home, creating a refuge for Brent and fellow slaves similar to that which women in the domestic sphere created for their husbands and families. The grandmother teaches Brent what society expects of its women in the domestic sphere, fulfilling her maternal role of inspiring Brent to desire this sentimental role in her own life. However, as the grandmother instills these sentimental values in Brent, pressuring her to fulfill this societal narrative, Brent's desires are not without conflict. As a slave, Brent is without identity as a piece of property while her grandmother lives as a free woman; although the grandmother's lessons make an impact on Brent's upbringing, Brent admires her grandmother more for her freedom to choose that domestic role than for the domestic role itself. Thus, while Brent sees what society expects of its women, she feels excluded from the narrative because she does not get to choose this role for herself.

In an attempt to gain the same freedom as her grandmother, Brent approaches her life in slavery as one of defiance. Joanne Braxton's article points out one such mode of identity defiance—Brent's "sass." As Braxton notes, "'Sass' is a word of West African derivation associated with the female aspect of the trickster figure," a figure seen in Jacobs' narrative through Linda Brent (386). Brent asserts her identity through her verbal wit and defense. When Dr. Flint questions her love of a free man, Brent receives a physical blow for answering the affirmative, to which she retorts, "you have struck me for answering you honestly. How I despise you!" (Jacobs 36). In moments where Brent is confronted with her master as her authority figure, she continually asserts her autonomy as something her master cannot control. When Dr. Flint reminds her, "do you know that I have a right to do as I like with you,—that I can kill you, if I please?," Brent does not cower nor remain silent; rather, she asserts her authority, declaring, "you have tried to kill me, and I wish you had; but you have no right to do as you like with me" (36). As a master, Dr. Flint believes that he has control over Brent's mind, body, and identity—his gender, economic, and racial positioning associates him with the dominating class of "master"—but in Brent, he receives no affirmation of his identity, either as a dominant master over his slave or as a dominant man over a woman. In both aspects of Dr. Flint's constructed identity, Brent attempts to usurp his sense of self through her own asserted autonomy and "sass," even if that sass contradicts her submissive woman's role, because it denies Dr. Flint the ability to treat her as his slave. For Brent, her use of sassy language becomes a "means of expressing her resistance" to having her identity constructed for her (Braxton 386).[26] In each instance that Dr. Flint or an equivalent character attempts to control Brent through her role as slave, Brent asserts herself, believing her desire for autonomous freedom is worth the fear of punishment she may receive and the sacrifice of parts of her femininity.

Brent's resistance to authority also is clearly seen through her sexual identity and the conflict that creates between her role as a slave and as a woman. Brent approaches her sexuality as another means of asserting authority over her identity; “more like her father, uncle, and brother in their stance of rebellion,” Brent shares with these male figures in her life their sense of autonomy, choosing to “actively resist” Dr. Flint’s demands rather than submit herself to his control (Wesley 65). However, this shared sense of identity with the male side of her family creates conflict for Brent because she is a woman. By choosing to resist participating in slavery’s institutional assertion that her body is her master’s property (thereby allowing her master to sexually control her), Brent feels she must assert her sexuality on her own terms, which means she must sacrifice her own feminine virtue. As Marilyn C. Wesley explains it:

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[26] Braxton compares Brent's use of sass to "the way Frederick Douglass uses his fists and his feet" (386). In her article, the comparison of two primary voices over the slave narrative genre is compelling through their parallels between physical response and verbal response. For more about the slave narrative in Jacobs' text as compared with Douglass' work, see Braxton's "Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: The Re-Definition of the Slave Narrative Genre."

> As a female slave, Linda is publically [sic] designated a kept woman whose sexuality is controlled by her owner. Privately, however, she aspires to the sexual purity which a free woman may choose as an avenue to virtue, the definitive moral choice of the northern Christian white women whom Jacobs addresses in her narrative. For a female slave to pursue virtue is to attempt personal instead of institutional definition. (64)

As Dr. Flint’s sexual pressure increases, Brent arrives at a moral crossroads between maintaining her sentimental purity by refusing Dr. Flint’s advances as long as she can and maintaining her freedom by choosing with whom she shares her virtue. This conflict between her private identity and her public identity furthers the conflict Brent’s character feels between her sentimental role and her role as slave. Brent sees the white women of society be praised for their purity and desires to uphold the same sentimental doctrine these women are expected to have. However, as a female slave, she does not receive the same praise but rather is punished for her purity by her master, for “it is deemed a crime in her to wish to be virtuous" (Jacobs 29). Suddenly, this sentimental role Brent desires to fill becomes nothing more than a fiction in her eyes, as she realizes that just as society constructs this pure role for a white woman, society constructs a contradictory role for its enslaved women. It is this submissive slave role that society expects her to fill, the very role Brent desires most to abandon, and as a result, Brent defies those expectations as best she can, even if that means sacrificing the part of her that aligned her most with the domestic sphere.

For Brent, her choice between her identity as a woman and slave becomes a forced decision; as a woman, she desires to remain virtuous and protect her sexuality for her future husband, and for the most part, she succeeds in eluding Dr. Flint's advances—she denies him the chance to sexually control her through his notes, his plots, and his words. But, as a slave, her identity as a woman also is denied. The female identity is associated with the female person, and as a slave, she is denied any sense of personality because she is considered property: "I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me" (Jacobs 48). Upon realizing her identity as a sentimental woman is denied by society and replaced with the constructed sexual identity of a female slave, Brent realizes her only way of asserting her sense of self is by denying her ideal femininity through sleeping with a mate of her choice. This decision is not without its guilt and shame; as Jacobs notes in her narrative, "pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader!," knowing her readership is of the female identity she is forced to deny, "…you never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel" (49). A sense of shame is ever present in Brent's decision to sleep with Mr. Sands and birth his children, a shame that she has stained her identity as a woman through her sexuality. Brent fears admitting her decision to her grandmother, her physical example of the ideal woman's role who felt pride in her granddaughter for not succumbing to her master's sexual advances (49). For Brent, the ability to maintain her identity is not without consequence, for the part of her identity she hoped to maintain privately—her sentimental purity—became the part of her identity she has to sacrifice to push back against her constructed slave role.

Even when looking at Jacobs' text as an artifact of society (looking outside the narrative of fiction and into the narrative of Jacobs' real life), her sense of self is still continually being threatened. Upon the final pages of her narrative, Jacobs reveals her fictional resolution: her freedom, or Brent's freedom, is purchased by another. To Jacobs, this single action, which she understands is coming from a place of love, is an action that undermines her life's work in maintaining autonomy over herself: "So I was *sold* at last! . . . I am deeply grateful to the generous friend who procured it, but I despise the miscreant who demanded payment for what never rightfully belonged to him or his" (163). The act of purchase is another attempt for society's expectation to assert itself over Brent's identity; the moment that "miscreant" demands money for Brent's freedom, an intangible item that the person has no authority over, Brent's autonomy is threatened. Despite her success in constructing an identity for herself in the North, there would always be someone who would try to force a constructed identity on her.

Furthermore, Jacobs' "freedom purchase" was not the only threat to her identity: even after Jacobs' experiences came to an end and her decision to write about her experiences began, the threat appeared under the guise of authorship. Jill LeRoy-Frazier emphasizes Yellin's introduction as a source depicting this authorial threat. As noted in the introduction, Jacobs had originally chosen Harriet Beecher Stowe to write her life's story; however, upon realizing that Stowe intended to alter that story for her own personal use in *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Jacobs' "felt Stowe had betrayed her as a woman, denigrated her as a mother, and threatened her as a writer" (qtd. in LeRoy-Frazier 158). Jacobs believed should would still be able to maintain autonomy over her identity by choosing another writer to craft her narrative; however, Jacobs' identity is threatened by Stowe's decision to adapt Jacobs' life for her own sentimental plot. Stowe's decision, in Jacobs' eyes, was an attempt to deny Jacobs' authority over both her story and her life, reconstructing Jacobs' identity to better fit Stowe's sentimental mold. This attempt to change Jacobs' experiences for fictional benefit was another attempt by society to construct Jacobs' identity as it saw fit, only this time, the identity construction would take place in fiction.

As a result, Jacobs broke her authorial ties with Stowe and decided to become her own author (LeRoy-Frazier 158). Understanding the sentimental roles African Americans held even in the most abolitionist fiction, Jacobs saw this attempt to adapt her experiences into these conventions as a means of stripping her of her identity. Rather than allow this to occur, Jacobs reacts by denying Stowe the opportunity to deconstruct Jacobs' experiences, choosing instead to assert her identity once more by authoring her own story.[27] For Jacobs, the foundations behind all of her decisions were what she had been raised to believe—that she did not choose the identity of "slave" for herself.[28] Because she did not choose to be a slave, she would never allow anyone, in fiction or reality, a chance to deconstruct her sense of self and force her back into that slave role; as a result, Jacobs adapted her own life into the sentimental slave narrative but did so without jeopardizing the truth of her story nor the control over her own identity.

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[27] Anne Bradford Warner discusses Jacobs' choice of writing her own narrative as one that could deconstruct the fictional identities that contemporary fiction was crafting for African Americans and slaves:

Frado, "Our Nig": Harriet E. Wilson's Appropriation of Her Own Signifier

While Jacobs' journey towards autonomous identity remained one of the only female slave narratives modern literary scholars were able to study, in 1982 Dr. Henry Louis Gates Jr. recovered Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig*, a second quasi-slave narrative that used sentimental conventions to discuss identity construction. Suddenly, another voice could contribute to the struggle for autonomous control over the African American female identity, a struggle that was continually being threatened by society's need to control the identities of its people. However, what's different about this voice is that it comes from a freed African American woman, not a woman who is born as a slave. The inclusion of a free woman's voice shows us how this desire for autonomy over identity ranged across all African Americans because society for the most part denied them of their autonomy the same way—by denying them the opportunity to forge their own identity, even a sentimental one, and forcing them into a slave identity.

"*Incidents* is the antidote to these pictures of slaves as mindless and carefree children, unconcerned with an orderly existence and incapable of serious, self-motivated productivity. Willis, Murray, and even Stowe help to perpetuate these reductive and demeaning types, and Jacobs responds by rectifying these 'fictional' images" (33). For more, see Warner.

[28] Thomas Doherty's article "Harriet Jacobs' Narrative Strategies: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" explores further Linda Brent's sense of self in the narrative, discussing briefly the difficulty for slaves in fulfilling a role as slave while maintaining their own identity. See starting on p. 86.

Wilson's narrative follows a structure similar to that of Jacobs'; Frado, a young mulatto girl born in the North, is introduced to the reader as an innocent child who is able to freely construct her own identity. Being born free, Frado, like Linda Brent, is not introduced to the institution of slavery and never told she is someone else's property—as an African American woman born in the North, her identity appears to be one that she can willfully control. However, like the sentimental heroine's conventional plot, Frado's life is forever altered by the loss of Seth Shipley, one of Frado's father figures, and Mag, Frado's mother. When deciding whether or not to abandon Frado, Seth argues that Frado "would be a prize somewhere" and feels little guilt over giving her up to the Bellmont family (Wilson 17). For Seth, giving Frado to the Bellmonts becomes a simple transaction—in order to find an income, the Shipleys must give up one of their children. Mag provides little rebuttal in the abandoning of her child, and soon Frado is taken to the Bellmonts' doorstep and left behind to become a sentimental heroine as Mrs. Bellmont's live-in servant girl.

At this young age, Frado's understanding of who she is—a free African American girl—shatters as Mrs. Bellmont begins to label her as "our nig" and "nigger," terms that up to this point in Frado's life she has never been called. As a child, Frado grew up with her family in freedom, but it is when she is taken into the Bellmont household—a home associated with high society—that her freedom is stolen and replaced with new demands and expectations of her. On her first day in the new home, Mrs. Bellmont begins to reconstruct Frado's life: Frado is told how to feed the hens correctly, with "any departure from this rule to be punished by a whipping," where Frado may eat her meals and for how long, when to serve the family meals, how to wash dishes, and more household chores and associated threats that bear strong resemblance to that associated with Southern slavery (Wilson 29). As the narrator comments, “it was a new discipline to the child” taking on so many household responsibilities and being threatened with physical punishment if she completed her work another way (29).

Up to this point in Frado’s life, Wilson has crafted her as a sentimental heroine—she is orphaned by her family and sent to live with strangers in a home where she is met with hardships. However, upon arriving at the Bellmont home, that sentimental role is taken from her as well, and any instance of fulfilling that role becomes squandered by Mrs. Bellmont. When Frado bemoans her situation, wishing for her mother to return for her that she may escape this new, challenging life, she does not receive comfort or advice for how to succeed in her new situation like so many sentimental heroines receive from family and strangers. Instead, when Frado expresses sadness towards her hardships, Mrs. Bellmont denies her of her emotions, stating with a physical blow of rawhide that crying “was a symptom of discontent and complaining which must be ‘nipped in the bud’” (Wilson 30). In sentimental narratives, expressions of emotion are frequent and praised as moments of learning, but for Frado, the only lesson she receives is that she is not considered by Mrs. Bellmont to be a member of the woman’s sphere. Forcing her to work outside with nothing to cover her skin, Mrs. Bellmont denies Frado her appearance in an attempt to push her further into this slave identity, desiring Frado’s skin “to darken the shade which nature had first bestowed upon her as best befitting” (39). The complete restructuring of Frado’s life represents Mrs. Bellmont’s attempts of forcing Frado into this slave-like narrative by denying her a sentimental one; rather than grow up under Mrs. Bellmont’s domestic influence into womanhood, Frado is denied her personality to become a servant that is forced to complete a number of daily tasks without proper pay. In this essential slave-like environment, Frado's sense of self is threatened, both figuratively and literally, by her community, and rather than be permitted the freedoms her childhood instilled her to feel, Frado's life becomes structured to support society rather than support herself.

And yet, despite this newly constructed identity being forced upon her, Frado resolves to maintain autonomy over her own identity as best she can. From the first day of her indentured servitude, Frado chooses her own fate: "she was of willful, determined nature, a stranger to fear, and would not hesitate to wander away should she decide to" (Wilson 28). As Frado grows older in the Bellmont's home, her determination grows with her; like Brent's resistance through her "sass," Frado's voice and actions reflect an independent spirit. When her peers laugh at Frado's "cast-off" attire, quickly attributed by Wilson to Mrs. Bellmont's unfair treatment, "Nig's retorts [are] so mirthful" that what was once a symbol for embarrassment becomes one of humor (37). Similarly, while at home she remains under Mrs. Bellmont's tyrannical eye, at school among her classmates "the pent up fires burst forth" through pranks and antics (38). In seeking school as an outlet to assert her own identity, Frado's rebellious tricks and wit begin to resemble Jacobs' "sass." Although Frado is set up to be a sentimental heroine in her story through her early orphaning and hardships, the submissive role these heroines are expected to fill represents the very role Frado desires to abandon the most. Frado might not mind being a submissive woman, but she cannot bring herself to submit to Mrs. Bellmont's dominance and lose her sense of self. Rather than submit to Mrs. Bellmont's perception of who

Frado is, Frado asserts her own identity in the safety of the school, allowing her sense of self an outlet in an environment associated most with identity formation.

As well, Frado asserts autonomy over her identity in her verbal resistance within the Bellmont home. Mrs. Bellmont, the equivalent Southern slave owner of the slave narrative, is presented as a dominating figure in the household, though not necessarily a sentimental one. As the mother of the home, Mrs. Bellmont is supposed to fill the role of the maternal figure; however, her maternal role is expressed in ways that are not sentimental, such as physical and verbal abuse, and her desire to care for her children is taken to an unfortunate extreme. Mrs. Bellmont asserts authority over her own children's identities; in one example, when Jane desires to marry George instead of Henry, she feels conflicted over what to do, admitting to Aunt Abby that "Mother will make [her]" marry Henry because he is her mother's preferred choice (Wilson 58). However, when all is said and done, Jane asserts her authority to construct her own identity in spite of Mrs. Bellmont's attempts, moving away and living happily outside of her mother's reach. Through this example we see Mrs. Bellmont as the controlling figure within the home, one that reflects a desire to construct her family as she sees fit. When the Bellmont family discusses the unfair role that has been placed on Frado by Mrs. Bellmont, Aunt Abby asks Mr. Bellmont why he allows her to rule over Frado in such a way, to which Mr. Bellmont replies, "How am I to help it? Women rule the earth, and all in it," and, when their authority is challenged, force everyone to "live in hell" until that authority is reestablished (44). Thus, when Mrs. Bellmont's own children abandon her to assert autonomy over their identities, Mrs. Bellmont's attempts to control Frado only increase, resulting in physical beatings and punishments that push Frado to her limits.

Despite Mrs. Bellmont's position, though, Frado reacts as Linda Brent does to Dr. Flint—with verbal resistance. When Mrs. Bellmont chooses to attack Frado for her supposed lethargy during daily chores, Frado does what no one else can do—she challenges Mrs. Bellmont's authority directly.[29] When Mrs. Bellmont grabs a stick in order to beat Frado, Frado screams "Stop!," threatening to Mrs. Bellmont, "strike me, and I'll never work a mite more for you" (Wilson 105). As a result of "this unexpected demonstration, her mistress, in amazement, dropped her weapon, desisting from her purpose of chastisement" and resulting in Frado's successful assertion of her own identity (105). Instead of silently submitting to her mistress's abuse, Frado chooses to resist through language, paralleling Jacobs' similar decision to evade Dr. Flint's physical advances through verbal resistance. In this way, both women are attempting to assert control over themselves and deny society its expectations; while this assertion forces these women to sacrifice their sentimental submissiveness and possibly their role in the domestic sphere, both women feel that sacrifice is worth the cost, as the alternative would result in the loss of their autonomy. Thus, they resist actively and verbally—for them, it is the only way to regain control over their own identities.

Despite their few differences, Wilson's narrative ending greatly resembles that of Jacobs'—upon turning eighteen, Frado leaves the Bellmont home in search of a place where she can construct her identity away from those attempting to control her, and like Jacobs, finds mixed results. In particular, Wilson decides to write down her experiences as a sentimental fiction, but it is here that her experience diverts from Jacobs' experience.

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[29] It should be noted here that while some characters have attempted to challenge Mrs. Bellmont indirectly or absently, or in Mr. Bellmont's case, challenge directly and fail (see Wilson 104), only Frado is successful in asserting herself over Mrs. Bellmont in this instance.

As an act of defiance Jacobs did not do, Wilson adapts society's label for her as a symbol of her own autonomy: "Wilson signifies on her own culturally determined identity in her use of 'Our Nig' as the title of both the book and its author" (Ernest 429). Wilson intentionally declares herself, the author, to be "Our Nig;" in this act of resistance, Wilson appropriates a label society constructed for her own personal benefit, making the reader aware that while the term "nig" may be a signifier for Frado, it is she, not society, who gets to determine what that label signifies. Wilson's narrative thus becomes an explicit attempt to undermine society's constructions by appropriating them for her own use—just as society can make a label represent one thing, Frado's use of that label proves its very fictionality. As fiction, the label "nig" can be altered from one of derision to one of praise according to the author's use, for its meaning is not fixed—like language, it can be redefined according to its use. In the same way, Wilson, like Jacobs, uses the sentimental genre to tell her story, but she alters that genre to better fit her personal experience; the expectations towards that genre are not firm, and the meaning behind that genre can be extended to fit anyone's circumstances. At the end of the day, at the end of the narrative, it is Wilson who is in control of her own identity, and by labelling herself as "nig" and using society's sentimental genre to do so, she provides African Americans a way to assert themselves by redefining the very labels society constructs for them. Through Wilson, her reader is reminded of the adaptability of language; all languages, like all people, have the opportunity to be redefined and looked at in a new way.

Reaching the Paradox of Jacobs' and Wilson's Identity Construction

While the assertion of autonomy over identity is clearly seen in both Jacobs' and Wilson's use of the slave narrative genre, it should be reinforced that this assertion becomes conflicted when interconnected with sentimental conventions. Both Jacobs' *Incidents* and Wilson's *Our Nig* have been identified as autobiographical because the content of their narratives has come from their own historical experiences. But, as sentimental narratives, these texts also present a number of fictional themes and conventions. Both texts discuss the issue of identity in relation to sentimentality, as Brent and Frado are characterized as sentimental heroines who sacrifice parts of that role in an effort to gain autonomy over what remains. As previously stated, the presence of sentimental conventions has become a common understanding for scholars studying these texts. However, when analyzing these sentimental conventions in terms of identity formation, the presence of these conventions creates a conflict for the authors. By reconstructing their histories into the formulaic conventions of sentimental fiction, the authors are also revealing to the reader how easily their realities can be understood as works of fiction and how fiction can help readers understand reality around them.

This revelation affects Jacobs' and Wilson's desire to assert autonomy over their identity by creating a paradox of identity. Katja Kandzler explores this conflict in relation to the African American identity as portrayed in the public and private spheres; she notes, "for the slave narrator, the connotations of public and private have been reversed: while publicity signifies (albeit limited) protection, privacy signals vulnerability and exposure." Within the private sphere, Jacobs and Wilson feel their autonomy continually being deconstructed; to protect themselves from those who threatened their identity, these women wrote their histories down, creating permanence in their identities because the act of writing allowed both women to construct their identity on paper as a reflection of their real life. Thus, *Incidents* and *Our Nig*, two narratives detailing the private experiences of these women, were given to the public as an act of resistance against society's construction of their African American female identities. However, by writing down their experiences within the confines of sentimental conventions, or in more general terms, within a fictional construction, both Jacobs and Wilson are revealing to the reader that the very role these women are attempting to present is a fictional construction rather than a real identity. Paradoxically, the act of writing down each woman's experiences simultaneously allows them an outlet to assert their sense of self in reality and denies them that sense of self because it is constructed through fiction.

Although Harriet Jacobs, like Harriet E. Wilson, claims to the reader, "be assured this narrative is no fiction," Jacobs' act of writing her history through sentimental conventions contradicts her assertion (2). Both Jacobs and Wilson desire freedom—freedom from society's treatment of African Americans (both slaves and freemen), freedom from their tragic pasts, and, more notably, freedom to define themselves. But when it comes to freedom through writing, that freedom becomes limited: "the concern with freedom…is…a consequence of the perceived analogy between plot in fiction and the 'plot' of God's creation, ideology or fate. It is a concern with the idea of being trapped within someone else's order" (Waugh 120). Rather than condemn these authors for their failed attempts at crafting their own 'self,' I believe that their attempts to seek constructed identities reflect a postmodern understanding of reality as well as a means of sanity within that understanding. The choice to write down their narratives was not a choice made lightly; like with any author, a number of factors went into the decision to write down their private experiences for the public. However, if we as critics choose to believe that these authors were not aware of the paradox of identity they were entering, then we are risking denying ourselves the opportunity to see the complexity with which these African American female voices viewed the world around them.

By having their once free reality so abruptly reconstructed, both Jacobs and Wilson saw firsthand how impermanent reality truly is—in a blink of an eye, a new reality is constructed with little to no say from these women. Reality for Wilson and Jacobs became one of constructions. By going through those experiences of continually circumventing societal constructions while attempting to assert their own, these two women began to see reality as nothing more than a fiction that can be altered to fit the desires of those in control. Thus, the decision to write down their experiences as both slave narratives and sentimental fictions was an informed decision. By choosing to create a paradox of identity through these means, Jacobs and Wilson allow their readers to see reality as many African American women saw it—as a construct, not a fixed entity.

Through sharing the perspective of those whose identities were reconstructed without consent, Jacobs and Wilson widen their readers' understanding of society around them as a construction. In being socially constructed, society can be reconstructed, a desire that cannot be neglected from the abolitionist perspective. In a world where society constructs its expectations and ideology over all who exist within that society, it's easy to understand why William H. Gass believes the creation of our fictional selves is an inevitable decision to remain sane in a world outside of our control. As Jacobs and Wilson assert in their narratives, sometimes we must deny ourselves as real and take on this fictional role to show society how reality is constructed similarly to fiction and how fiction is constructed similarly to reality. When society sees itself as a construction, society becomes a place of opportunity for change—if reality is constructed as fiction, then, like fiction, it can be altered for the benefit of all.

CHAPTER 3

The Joke on Her Side: Exploring the Fictionality of the Woman's Sphere in *Little Women*

"Not being a genius, like Keats, it won't kill me," she said stoutly, "and I've got the joke on my side, after all; for the parts that were taken straight out of real life, are denounced as impossible and absurd, and the scenes that I made up out of my own silly head, are pronounced 'charmingly natural, tender, and true.' So I'll comfort myself with that; and, when I'm ready, I'll up again and take another."

—Jo March, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, p. 297

Seemingly an anomaly of sentimental fiction, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-9) did not completely disappear from American culture after its first round of popularity. As late-nineteenth century genre preferences transitioned away from sentimentality and towards realism, *Little Women* remained cherished in many American homes for its relatable characters and humorous story; although the novel followed its sentimental sisters in disappearing from high-literature conversations, it never disappeared from American society entirely. Contemporary critics of the time praised *Little Women* for its sentimentality, calling it "a charming book for girls, inculcating in a pleasant, cheerful way lessons which the young need to learn, to make home happy and their lives desirable" (qtd. in Clark 62). In the same way, twentieth and twenty-first-century critics also admired the novel, but they admired it outside of its sentimentality, appreciating how its characters "betray the weaknesses of femininity," or, in Jo's case, "[reject] sentimental femininity altogether" (Strickland 72). In its critical reception, *Little Women* is established as a binary—the novel either is regarded as sentimental or it is studied through a modern lens that takes the novel away from its sentimental roots.

Although both interpretations have their merits, my central focus once more falls in between these two types of criticism. Like Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig*, and other sentimental works, Alcott's *Little Women* brings a sense of reality into its fiction through its autobiographic nature.[30] Like Linda Brent and Frado, the March girls may be born within the conventions of the sentimental novel, but their lives are inspired by the real experiences Alcott and her family faced growing up. Writers like Louisa May Alcott depended on the sentimental genre as a familiar lens to present the reality they faced every day, and for many of these women, that reality was filled with societal expectations concerning how they should act or who they should grow up to be; however, as writers and world-builders themselves, these authors also recognized the commonalities between what was expected in their women's roles and what was expected in their women's fiction and, using their talents, worked to blur those lines for the reader in a postmodern way. The March sisters then, when paralleled with Alcott and her sisters—Anna (Meg), Louisa (Jo), Elizabeth (Beth), and Abigail May (Amy)—become metafictional characters who blur the lines between sentimental fictional heroines and women in the domestic sphere. With expectations as embedded in literature as domesticity is during this time, Alcott uses the very genre that helped establish society's private sphere to expose that sphere's idealistic expectations.

In metafiction, fictional texts work to balance the familiar with the unfamiliar, creating a twist in the reader's expectations without losing their reader entirely (Waugh 12).[31] In Alcott's *Little Women*, that balance is two-fold: on a narrative level, Alcott relies on society's expectations of sentimental fiction in order to create a new awareness in her reader, but on a character level, she incorporates familiar parts of her own life into her fiction. Through her use of the sentimental genre, Alcott's narrative can "not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction" through her incorporation of genre conventions and personal experiences, but also can "explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text" (2). Challenging the ideal woman's sphere through the sentimental genre that many modern critics believe established that sphere, *Little Women* offers a new perspective of women as a collective identity by blurring the lines between what is "real" and what is "fiction," revealing how similar the two have become. Understanding its power as a piece of metafiction, the novel presents familiar sentimental conventions to the reader and then analyzes those expectations, thereby allowing the reader to see a wider definition of the woman's sphere.

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[30] For another example, see Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* (1854).

[31] And, as Patricia Waugh points out, the familiar and unfamiliar balance was necessary "for any message to be committed to memory," and that without this redundancy, "texts are read and forgotten" (12).

The March Girls' Writings as Metafiction

Little Women's clearest metafictional moments are presented through the March sisters' writings, as each text presents an awareness of society's expected sentimental conventions and a commentary about those conventions. The girls often imitate in their real life the fiction they read as children. The novel's preface, an excerpt from John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* that encourages piety in "little tripping maids," presents to the reader a taste of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, an impactful novel that is referenced throughout *Little Women* and is a source of inspiration for the March girls playing "pilgrims," imitating the Christian journey they read about in Bunyan's work (Alcott 44, 596). Similarly, the girls later create a secret society called the Pickwick Club; "as all of the girls admired Dickens," the sisters borrow the ideas of Charles Dickens' first novel to create their own set of Pickwick Papers, or *The Pickwick Portfolio*, "to report their journeys, adventures, and observations on a variety of characters and manners" and "to which all contributed something" (134-135). Once more, the girls, being inspired by fiction, imitate that fiction as a game by writing their own version as inspired by their lives. As a collective, the sisters put together notes of what they find interesting: Beth tells "The History of a Squash;" Amy admits her forgetfulness by writing that she, as N. Winkle, "makes trouble in his club by laughing and sometimes won't write his piece in this fine paper;" Meg presents beautiful and sentimental writing that ends with a "masked marriage;" and Jo presents her Poet's Corner with a meta-poem about the paper in which it's published, discussing the authors' works in an effort to "tread the path of literature / That doth to glory lead" (135-136).

Within this portfolio, the sisters work to imitate the literature they have read so far, but in doing so, their ideas about the woman's sphere are simultaneously displayed. Women's roles can still be seen in the sentimental reports and advertisements promoting the weekly meeting "at Kitchen Place, to teach young ladies how to cook" and "the Dustpan Society," when the girls will "parade in the upper story of the Club House," or the house, to clean (Alcott 138). However, through their imitation of Dickens' first novel, the girls also expand the limits of the woman's sphere. While the girls discuss the sentimental duties women are meant to fulfill, they write these duties down under the pseudonyms of men, bringing an explicitly male voice into a presumably female sphere and blurring the lines between gender roles. By inserting such moments as these where the girls imitate the fiction they are reading, the novel is speaking to the larger sentimental notion of society expecting the women's roles that are formed in fiction to be fulfilled in real life. While Dickens and Bunyan are not considered sentimental writers, what Alcott hopes to achieve through these stories is to show how impressionable fiction is on the mind. At a young age, the girls learn to imitate fiction as games in real life, and later, when sentimental fiction asks her reader to practice what it is preaching, the girls allow this fiction to become their reality, thus blurring the lines between the two to where the reader cannot tell the difference. This time, the imitation is not a part of a game, but rather it is directly influential to life; and yet, the two are not so dissimilar. Just as the girls as children imitate fiction in reality, so too do they do so as adults—the line between what is fiction and what is real overlaps, and the expectations created as a result become nothing more than fictional constructions imitated in a fictional reality. The fiction does not become real—instead, reality is revealed to resemble fiction.

Alcott's Jo March explains this fluidity best when she expresses her confusion towards her own reader's expectations. After having published sensational stories filled with "love, mystery, and murder" in various columns, Jo resolves to publish the novel she has been writing throughout *Little Women* (Alcott 292). The publishers, upon receiving the novel, wish for edits, and, as a writer, Jo feels torn between the pride for her own work and the promise of money for revisions. Resolving to revise so that her sickly sister Beth could see her work printed, Jo "laid her first-born on her table, and chopped it up as ruthlessly as any ogre," in the hopes of listening to her readers' criticism (295). While Jo's character appears the least sentimental throughout the novel, her acts of writing present the maternal aspects of sentimentality—just as Marmee molds her children in the ways of sentimental society, so too does Jo mold her "child" to meet society's expectations of her work. However, after reading the reviews of her novel, Jo feels dismayed; she asks Marmee, “you said, mother, that criticism would help me; but how can it, when it’s so contradictory that I don’t know whether I have written a promising book, or broken all the ten commandments?” (296). Her work either influences society for the better, or her work influences society for the worse, but the response is divided as to how her novel fits into society. In this moment, Jo begins to understand how diversely a novel can be interpreted.

Jo presents the central problem with fiction imitating reality and how the two are interpreted together, a proclamation this reader has seen before in the epigraph:

> “Not being a genius, like Keats, it won’t kill me,” she said stoutly, “and I’ve got the joke on my side, after all; for the parts that were taken straight out of real life, are denounced as impossible and absurd, and the scenes that I made up out of my own silly head, are pronounced ‘charmingly natural, tender, and true.’ So I’ll comfort myself with that; and, when I’m ready, I’ll up again and take another.” (Alcott 297)

As a sentimental writer, Jo begins to understand the difference between reality and fiction, as those scenes taken from life are considered fiction, and those of fiction are taken as genuine. Jo’s writing here begins to represent the problem with sentimental fiction through the publishing of her own work: society attempts to engrain certain expectations in both fiction and life that translate equally between the two. When Jo presents her real life, her reader finds it false, as it does not match what fiction establishes as what life should resemble; in the same way, when Jo uses sentimental tropes and conventions in her work, the reader interprets them as true to reality. Upon realizing society cannot differentiate between what is real and what is not, Jo March approaches her writing as she approaches her life—with an awareness that reality, like her fiction, is a social construct. That mentality is as freeing for Jo as it can be for the reader; when faced with a fictional reality, the expectations of women suddenly become less rigid, and when a reader becomes aware that her life is not predetermined, she becomes free to construct her own reality the way she desires, not the way desired for her.

The difference Jo realizes between fiction and reality is the same realization Alcott hopes to show her readers through *Little Women*—that readers expect certain outcomes of fiction to be true when they are actually fiction—and by presenting a novel that questions the sentimental genre it uses, Alcott allows the reader to recognize the fallibility of fiction in reality and also the fallibility of reality itself. Like Jo, Alcott comforts herself in contradiction because it is the only way to understand society; in the same way, by reading *Little Women* as both fiction and real, the reader becomes aware of the contradiction and the perpetual influence fiction and reality has on the other. The line between truth and fiction is perpetually blurred, as the two intertwine to such a degree that the binary deconstructs and what the reader is left with is a new understanding of their reality and their fiction as socially, and thus influentially, constructed.

Sisters on a Spectrum: Discerning Fact and Fiction through the March Girls

Paralleling Jo's revelation about her readers blurring the lines between what is fictional and what is real, our own readings of Alcott's text take on a new meaning, as Alcott's readers risk falling into the same contradiction. *Little Women* fulfills many of the reader's expectations as a sentimental novel, but as readers approach Alcott's text in this way, the familiar sentimental conventions are blurred with reality upon learning that the model for these conventions was Alcott's real life. Alcott extends her novel beyond the explicit metafiction of the March girls' writings by including herself into her narrative—the lines between what is Alcott's imagination and what is Alcott's life become blurred as readers approach her familiar sentimental novel through an unfamiliar lens. As critics of Alcott's text, readers run the risk of perpetuating the same criticism that Jo finds so perplexing because the line between fiction and reality is blurred.

Many sentimental genre conventions are evident upon first reading the novel, particularly through Marmee, the March girls' mother. As the girls transition from childhood into womanhood, Marmee fills the role of the maternal figure, guiding her daughters in the ways of true womanhood.[32] When Amy slips through the ice after an argument with Jo, Marmee teaches Jo a lesson in controlling her temper, as patience and humility are key virtues in the woman's sphere (Alcott 117). Later, Marmee repeats these sentimental lessons through her moral guidance, sharing with her girls that, "if I don't seem to need help, it is because I have a better friend, even than father, to comfort and sustain me" (117). Marmee fulfills the role of a pious and caring mother, teaching her daughters to rely on their Heavenly Father to answer life's struggles: "the more you love and trust Him, the nearer you will feel to Him, and the less you will depend on human power and wisdom" (118). Marmee's actions match the role society asks of its mothers: to be the caring and religious role model for her children, who are to be raised as good Christians in society. She praises Amy for her quiet prayer corner, complete with "dusty rosary" and "well-worn little book, and the lovely picture with its garland of evergreen" (222), and she helps Meg adjust to being a wife, guiding her to be submissive and avoid tempers and trivial arguments with her husband (303). In fact, one of the biggest moral successes for Marmee, from a sentimental standpoint, is when Jo, the critically-acclaimed feminist of the family, admits her role within the woman's sphere, saying to her future husband Mr. Bhaer "I may be strong-minded, but no one can say I'm out of my sphere now,—for woman's special mission is supposed to be drying tears and bearing burdens. I'm to carry my share" (485). It is Marmee who teaches Jo and her sisters the ways of their "sphere," and through her moral and domestic teachings, Marmee's maternal sentimentality is seen as successful in herself, her daughters, and her readers.

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[32] For more information about the idea of true womanhood, see Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood."

However, while Marmee and her maternal lessons play a large role in presenting the novel's sentimental conventions, the novel is not her story alone—it is also the story of her little women—and it is when their journeys are explored that the novel begins to address its use of sentimental conventions. Recognizing her primary readership to be a group of women, Alcott understood how restrictive a single protagonist could be in terms of its relatability. While popular sentimental works like Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* were effective among their female audience, the use of a single female protagonist implicitly taught the reader that there was a singular role that all women must imitate, paralleling the expectations of women's roles in the woman's sphere. Rather than use a single heroine that sentimental narratives consider the norm, Alcott used multiple protagonists—Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March—to create her story.

Exemplifying this focus on multiple perspectives, the novel's opening scene presents each protagonist equally; when the March girls realize that they will not be receiving gifts for Christmas, the four sisters each respond according to her personality:

> “Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents,” grumbled Jo, lying on the rug.
>
> “It’s so dreadful to be poor!” sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.
>
> “I don’t think it’s fair for some girls to have lots of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all,” added little Amy, with an injured sniff.
>
> “We’ve got father and mother, and each other, anyhow,” said Beth, contentedly, from her corner. (Alcott 45)

Through this brief scene, the reader sees hints of who these sisters will become—Meg reveals her focus on fashion and economic status, Jo, a free spirit, grumbles on the rug (a rather freeing position as opposed to a chair), Amy hints at her youngest-sister status through her comparison of herself to others, and sweet Beth presents her contentment. While traditional sentimental fiction “intensified women’s gender-group identification, by assimilating diverse personalities to one work-role that was also a sex-role signifying a shared and special destiny” (Cott 100), Alcott’s *Little Women*, through the March girls, allows these diverse personalities to be heard in order to challenge the idea of a standardized woman’s role. As sentimental heroines according to genre conventions, these March girls present the familiar narrative structure of journeying from childhood to womanhood, but each does so in her own way. As Sandra A. Zagarell proposes in “Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre,” collective narratives, or narratives focusing on a community of women rather than an individual, “tend to be episodic, built primarily around the continuous small-scale negotiations and daily procedures through which communities sustain themselves" (503).[33] Being a collective narrative due to its collective of women within the March home, *Little Women* focuses on each sister's journey towards womanhood through episodic chapters detailing her daily struggle with identity, life decisions, family, work, and sisterhood in the March home.

The reader dives into *Little Women* expecting to follow the sentimental journeys of the four March girls; however, as the sentimental narrative surrounding these sisters is built, the reader is continually reminded that what she is reading is a piece of fiction. In the first chapter of *Little Women*, the narrator makes herself known by intruding on the story, never allowing the reader to suspend her disbelief and get lost in the narrative. After introducing each of the four sisters, the narrator notes that "as young readers like to know 'how people look,' we will take this moment to give them a little sketch of the four sisters" (Alcott 47). The narrator returns in the same way throughout the novel, providing letters from the characters by "[robbing] an imaginary mail" (196), noting that she has not done her duty "as humble historian of the March family" without including a chapter about John and Meg's children (467), and lecturing the reader about why she should treat spinsters kindly (448). At one point, the narrator's intrusion affects the fate of the novel itself, as she declares to the reader that whether *Little Women* receives a second volume "depends upon the reception given to the first act of the domestic drama" (255). In each of these instances, the reader is reminded that what she is reading is, in fact, a "domestic drama" or fiction: she describes the contents in her narrative as "imaginary" and considers herself a "historian," actively writing down someone else's story. The narrator's intrusions and language choices deny her reader the ability to suspend her disbelief—each moment is explicitly pointed out to the reader to be fiction.

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[33] Zagarell's article is a strong text revolving around the narrative of community and is largely influenced by Nina Auerbach's *Communities of Women: An Idea of Fiction* and the feminist scholarship of Ellen Moers, Sandra M. Gilbert, and Susan Gubar. Zagarell's article largely focuses on nineteenth-century fiction, with particular attention to Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of Pointed Firs* and Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise.*

Aware of her work as being fiction, the narrator attempts to fulfill the reader's expectations by providing familiar narrative techniques that readers look for—a maternal mother figure, a young girl growing into womanhood and learning lessons in domesticity—while unfamiliarly revealing the narrator's awareness of the expectations her reader has for this narrative. Even near the end of the novel when Meg and Jo are discussing marriage, the narrator takes it upon herself to note to the reader that "if [Jo] had been the heroine of a moral story-book, she ought at this period of her life to have become quite saintly," transitioning wholly into this expected and familiar role (Alcott 444). The reader expects Jo to turn into the ideal sentimental heroine by the end of the novel, as sentimental genre conventions dictate; however, as the narrator notes to the reader, "Jo wasn't a heroine; she was only a struggling human girl, like hundreds of others" (444). Rather than show the idealistic effects of Marmee's lessons—that of the heroine practicing the sentimentality that is being simultaneously provoked through sympathy in the reader—*Little Women* uses Marmee's and the past generation's established sentimental expectations to expand on the idea of what women can become in society. Just as Jo notes her awareness of the woman's sphere when admitting her own role within it, Alcott too reveals her awareness of what the woman's sphere asks of women and shares this awareness with her reader. Jo may be established as a sentimental heroine in the novel, but Alcott reminds the reader that she is not what the genre expects of its heroines—she, in fact, resembles more closely the reader who may be struggling as much in her real life as Jo is in fiction.

By emphasizing the fictionality of the narrative to the reader, the reader becomes aware of the fictionality of her own reality, particularly through two means in which the reader's reality is presented in the novel: first, through the novel's intertextuality, and second, through the narrative's autobiographic experiences from Alcott's own life. As an avid reader herself, Alcott was familiar with a variety of literature—Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Goethe, Shakespeare, Bunyan, Dickens, Emerson, Thoreau, Browning, Longfellow, and Coleridge, to name a few and show the breadth of her readings.[34] Understanding her writing to be a response to the literature that has come before her, Alcott uses her literary knowledge to her advantage through intertextuality. As Linda Hutcheon notes, intertextuality "replaces the challenged author-text relationship with one between the reader and text, one that situates the locus of textual meaning within the history of discourse itself" (7). In other words, by introducing familiar novels, texts, and discourses within *Little Women*'s narrative, Alcott brings her narrative into the reader's life directly; in doing so, the reader becomes better able to understand Alcott's text because she is already familiar with the content and conversations revolving around these cultural artifacts in her society.

A number of allusions to literature can be found in *Little Women*, ranging from Shakespeare, Dickens, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the Bible to the poetry of

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[34] The version and edition of Alcott's *Little Women* I have cited here provides a wealth of background information concerning Alcott and her writing. See Alton's "Introduction," pp. 9-28, and "Appendix D: Literary Influences," pp. 584-604.

Tennyson, Browning, Longfellow, and a number of fables and fairy tales (Alton 25).[35] Most notably, Harriet Beecher Stowe's popular sentimental novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* makes an appearance when Jo, admitting her knowledge of the text, reminds her sister of the lesson learned from old Chloe to "'Tink ob yer marcies, chillen, tink ob yer marcies" (qtd. in Alcott 84). As well, Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* is also referenced as Jo and Laurie spend the morning by the river "reading and crying over" the popular sentimental novel's sympathetic plot, and later, Jo becomes inspired after reading a story by "Mrs. S.L.A.N.G. Northbury," an obvious allusion to writer E.D.E.N. Southworth that contemporary readers of the time would recognize (Alcott 142, 292). Through each instance of intertextuality, Alcott places her own novel within the familiar discourse concerning the works mentioned. As the March girls are consistently reading or being read these familiar works, the sisters are placed on the same level as the reader, who is both familiar with these novels and understands the importance of each of them. Especially in terms of the allusions to Stowe, Southworth, and Warner, Alcott places her novel within that sentimental conversation to show first how familiar she is with the genre and the writers of that era, as these are some of the writers who helped establish the very genre Alcott is exploring, and to show second how her characters, being fictional growing girls, are imitating Alcott's readers in reality by reading these real sentimental works and practicing their lessons in everyday life. When confronted by these intertextual moments, the reader sees the fictional narrative enter into her own reality because she is seeing the same novels she probably has read before; further, by recognizing what she is reading to be fictional, the reader is presented with a novel based in her reality that declares itself to be fiction. Thus, the novel blurs the lines between fiction and real life because at the same time that the novel declares its society to be fictional, it is declaring the reader's society to be fictional too.

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[35] Some specific intertextual and literary references include: John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (pp. 44, 53-55, 95-96, 152, 194, 244, 427, 444); William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (p. 310), *Macbeth* (p. 50), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (p. 363) and *Hamlet* (p. 398); Charles Dickens' *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (pp. 134-141), *David Copperfield* (p. 453), and *Oliver Twist* (p. 470); Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* (p. 80); Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (p. 84); Homer's *The Odyssey* (p. 101); Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (pp. 142-143); Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (p. 84) and *The Doom of Devergoil* (p. 347); Sylvanus Cobb's *The Sea Lion: or, the Privateer of the Penobscot. A story of ocean life and the heart's love* (p. 163); Frances "Fanny" Burney's *Evelina, or a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (p. 185); Samuel Johnson's *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* (p. 234) and *The Rambler* (p. 235); *Mrs. Cornelius's Receipt Book: The Young Housekeeper's Friend; or, A Guide to Domestic Economy and Comfort* (p. 298); Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (p. 316); Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales (p. 360); Tennyson's "A Dream of Fair Women" (p. 399); Maria Edgeworth's *The Parent's Assistant* (p. 413); and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Rainy Day" (p. 494).

At the same time that Alcott is establishing her novel's relationship to other works, especially other sentimental works, Alcott is also exploring the fictionality of those narratives, particularly by inserting her personal experiences into the conventions of her novel. A popular plot in many sentimental works is the death of a godly child; "the epitome of Victorian sentimentalism," the death of a child, such as little Eva in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, becomes a symbol of Christ's sacrifice for man that can guide others toward salvation and redemption (*Sensational Designs* 127-128). The death becomes a moral lesson for those left living, as it inspires those left behind to do better in their daily lives and religious duties. In *Little Women*, that sentimental convention is present through Beth March, who is described by the narrator as "an angel in the house" (Alcott 264). When Beth becomes sick and passes away, her death inspires Jo to try and be a better daughter; in her final moments, Beth asks Jo to take her place as the dutiful child of the home, that Jo will be "happier in doing that, than writing splendid books, or seeing all the world; for love is the only thing that we can carry with us when we go, and it makes the end so easy" (430). Presenting a familiar sentimental lesson in asking the rebellious daughter to set aside her passions and seek piety and selflessness in the woman's sphere, Beth's death inspires Jo to seek the identity that Beth and society desire her to fulfill.

However, as time passes after Beth's death, Jo finds difficulty in fulfilling that womanly role. Jo questions the promise she made to Beth, realizing that "it was easy to promise self-abnegation when self was wrapt up in another," but when that other is gone, the lesson over, and the aftermath of society expecting a changed woman, Jo feels a sense of failure in trying to meet such a high expectation (Alcott 441). As the narrator intrudes on Jo's sense of failure, she notes that "some people seemed to get all sunshine, and some all shadow; it was not fair, for [Jo] tried…to be good, but never got any reward,—only disappointment, trouble, and hard work" (442). In this moment, the narrator openly questions the fairness of society's expectations toward filling that ideal role. While some women meet sunshine, meaning that they find natural success as the dutiful woman at home, not all women can fill that role, leading to a sense of failure's "shadow" when they cannot meet that expectation. For Jo, whose natural abilities lay in her dreams and her writing, the role of selfless caretaker is a hard one to fill, and she quickly becomes frustrated at herself and her inability to successfully or happily do so. Like Jo, the reader recognizes the shadows of her attempts at sentimental selflessness, and by exposing this failure, Alcott allows the reader to connect with her fellow woman by understanding that she is not alone in her frustrations.

As Beth's death scene exhibits the frustrations women felt when faced with society's expectations, her death scene also structurally breaks down the binary between fiction and reality, allowing her reader to see these expectations as fictional as they are in the novel. In terms of the autobiographic nature of *Little Women*, Beth March's life bears strong parallels with Alcott's real-life sister Elizabeth, who was the inspiration behind Beth's character (Alton 14). In 1856, Elizabeth became ill with scarlet fever after providing charity to a nearby family, a nearly identical experience to that of Beth March (14). A number of parallels can be made between Elizabeth's and Beth's quick decline: the family creates a more comfortable room for the sickly daughter, who during her spare time would craft little trinkets and gifts "for the school children daily passing to and fro" (Alcott 426). Even the conversations held between Beth and Jo bear strong resemblance with Alcott's reality; just as Alcott writes how "Betty [a nickname for Elizabeth] says she feels 'strong when I am near,'" fictional Beth repeats this line nearly verbatim to Jo (qtd. in Alton 14). On the structural surface, the reader sees Beth's death as fulfilling the symbolic sentimental convention of a godly child bringing those near her closer to Christ, but when the reader becomes aware that her sentimental death scene bears such a strong resemblance to reality, the lines between what is real and what is not blur.

Just as Jo's readers in the epigraph believe the parts of her story that came out of her own experiences to feel false or fictional, the readers of *Little Women* approach Beth's death in a similar way; seeing this sentimental trope so often in other narratives, the reader views Beth's death scene as fictional due to its symbolic nature. The characters in the novel even point out this trope explicitly. After the first time Beth gets sick, Laurie hopes that she won't die because "she's so good, and we all love her so much" that God won't take her from them (Alcott 209). However, Jo, being aware of the sentimental death plot, groans, exclaiming "the good and dear people always do die;" perhaps she is remembering little Eva or another child's symbolic death she read about in fiction (209). Through Jo's comment, *Little Women* once more poses itself as aware of its own fictionality by hinting at the familiar structure of the child death scene. Reminding the reader once more that the novel is a work of fiction, the narrator admits during Beth's death that "seldom, except in books, do the dying utter memorable words, see visions, or depart with beatified countenances; and those who have sped many parting souls know, that to most the end comes as naturally and simply as sleep" (430). By noting the difference between how death plays out in fiction versus reality, the narrator exposes the reader to the fictionality of this scene. However, by recognizing that this death scene actually happened in real life—that Alcott's own sister Elizabeth suffered Beth's fate—this sentimental trope suddenly becomes very real, making the reader see reality as a fictional construct quite literally in the novel. What was once a familiar sentimental convention transforms into a real experience for the reader, thereby making them aware of how real her personal life is when it so seamlessly fulfills fictional constructs. Through this awareness, the familiar sentimental genre for these readers becomes unfamiliar, as the conventions they once saw as fictional and, therefore, abstract become representations of not only Alcott's life, but also their own lives. As an American herself, Alcott shares with her readers the same society and the same societal expectations, so by inserting her own experiences into the sentimental conventions of her narrative, Alcott engages the reader with not only Alcott's fiction and Alcott's life, but also with the fictionality of their own reality, something the reader may not have been aware of previously.

Along with the child death scene, the sentimental marriage and wifely role also appear in the novel through Meg, whose experiences within the woman's sphere create the same awareness in the reader regarding the fictionality of society's expectations and how interconnected reality and fiction can be. As the narrator begins describing Meg's marriage to Mr. John Brooke, she notes that, “like most other young matrons, Meg began her married life with the determination to be a model housekeeper” as her home became a “paradise” for her husband (Alcott 297). In Meg’s determination to fill her woman’s sphere as the ideal wife, Meg works hard to make paradise happy as she leaves behind “her cambric wrappers, [puts] on a big apron, and [falls] to work, as before said, with more energy than discretion” (298). Meg declares to John that he is always welcome to bring friends home to dine because, as Meg states, “I shall always be prepared; there shall be no flurry, no scolding, no discomfort, but a neat house, a cheerful wife, and a good dinner” (299). By determining to fill this role, Meg imitates society’s desire for its women to fill this ideal role, a role women like Meg feel pressure to fill.

Similar to their approach of Beth’s death scene, Alcott’s readers once more read Meg’s experiences as a familiar sentimental convention; however, in understanding Meg’s marriage as influenced by Alcott’s elder sister Anna’s marriage to John Pratt, what was once a simple sentimental convention becomes something much more real. Despite her best efforts, Meg begins to realize the difficulty in fulfilling her domestic role, her home becoming “not a tranquil one” as she quickly becomes overwhelmed and fusses over her daily chores to the point of exhaustion (Alcott 297). As the reader experiences Meg’s frustrations, the narrative becomes more relatable because these frustrations are not part of a fictional convention but rather a part of the reader’s reality. Very few works of fiction attempt to depict the difficulties of the domestic sphere—as Sarah Blackwood and Sarah Mesle note, Meg’s marital experiences, from her attempts to craft jelly to her attempts to sleep train the twins, are “an indication about how fragile the magic undergirding American domestic experience is.” By approaching the text as purely fictional, the reader is able to create distance between herself and the novel's characters, but when that fiction reveals a part of reality, those experiences of jelly making and caring for babies become real to the reader; suddenly, the reader is recognizing the fragility of her domestic sphere and the frustrations she too has felt towards her womanly role. By creating such a strong link between fiction and reality through her autobiographic experiences, Alcott allows the reader the opportunity to experience reality as fiction in her narrative, and, by doing so, allows the reader to recognize her own reality as fiction. Through this recognition, though, comes freedom, as suddenly the frustrations the reader feels towards society's rigid expectations become validated through Meg's domestic experiences, whether it be cleaning the home, taking care of the husband, being a mother, or simply making jelly. Each experience, large and small, is presented in an understanding way, allowing the reader to see that she is not alone in these expectations. As a result, the reader can widen her understanding of the female role as reflective of her own expectations and not those of society.

Once the reader is aware of where reality influences fiction, the reader becomes aware of more such ties between real life and fictional construction. When asked about the connections between her work and her life, Alcott notes just a few of these parallels:

> . . . though often changed as to time and place: . . . The early plays and experiences; Beth's death; Jo's literary and Amy's artistic experiences; Meg's happy home; John Brooke and his death; Demi's character. Mr. March did not go to the war, but Jo did. Mrs. March is all true, only not half good enough. Laurie is not an American boy, though every lad I ever knew claims the character. He was

> a Polish boy, met abroad in 1865. Mr. Lawrence is my grandfather, Colonel Joseph May. Aunt March is no one. (qtd. in Alton 11).

With the amount of real influences found in the narrative, both popular novels and personal experiences, the reader simultaneously is told that what she is reading is fictional and real, thereby deconstructing the reader's preconceived binary between the two. Once this binary is broken down, the reader becomes engaged with the text not only as fiction but as reflective of reality's fictional qualities; this impact becomes clear once the novel ends and the reader is left with an awareness of how embedded fictionality is within her own life, particularly when it comes to her own experiences within the woman's sphere. Through *Little Women*, the reader is allowed to see that fiction and reality are fluid, and it is unclear exactly what is real and what is not. With this realization, though, the reader is able to see reality not as finite, but as a fictional construct, and as such, the reader can alter it according to her needs. Suddenly, the frustrations she and Meg feel become justified as the reader realizes that the mold she attempts to fill is a fictional one of society's design—it is only unattainable because it is fictional. Rather than fit into a single mold, *Little Women* introduces the idea that the sentimental mold can be altered to the needs of the individual, not the needs of society, and still result in a happy and healthy marriage and life.

Deconstructing the Domestic Sphere

While the reviews surrounding *Little Women* compose of two parties—the sentimental and the anti-sentimental—the feminist metafiction utilized in Alcott's novel proves that a middle ground can be found. While author of *A Hunger for Home* Sarah Elbert argues that "Alcott had no intention of sentimentalizing the struggles of young women" by using the term "little women" as the novel's title, I argue that Alcott did intend to do just that (151). *Little Women* is presented as a sister to the sentimental novel, and as a sister, it presents familiar sentimental genre conventions in such a way that allows the author and the reader to question the fictionality and reality of those conventions. Alcott herself was never fully convinced of the sentimental role society expected its women to fill, admitting that while writing the second volume she "was determined not to marry Jo to Laurie" to please her reader's societal expectations of marriage, saying, "as if marriage were the only end and aim of a woman's life" (145). Subverting from the sentimental expectations placed on her in her own society, Alcott never married; instead, she chose to follow her "dream of supporting the family and being perfectly independent" through her writing (150).[36]

However, despite Alcott's decision to not marry and fulfill that societal expectation, Alcott "never questioned the value of domesticity" (Elbert 150). Through *Little Women*'s feminist metafiction, Alcott relies on the sentimental genre in order to reveal sentimentality in genre and society as fiction, not real—by intertwining Alcott's reality with society's sentimental genre conventions, Alcott blurs that binary so that her reader may be aware of the fictionality of her own society, especially when it comes to what that society expects of her. As readers of *Little Women*, we can see Alcott's decision to deconstruct the binary between fiction and reality as a way to expand our understanding of sentimental fiction and the woman's sphere. Through *Little Women*, the woman's sphere becomes a reality that is socially constructed—rather than represent a single reality, *Little Women* allows multiple realities to be discovered as the binary between fiction and real life deconstructs and the reader, now able to question the fictionality of her life, finds comfort in knowing what is expected of her is not naturally, but rather socially, constructed.

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[36] For more background information about Alcott's connection with the women's rights movement and her overall attitudes toward marriage, society, and her own novel, see Elbert's *A Hunger for Home.*

CONCLUSION

"… 'literature' is not a stable entity, but a category whose outlines and contents are variable."

—Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, p. 190

In one of the foundational studies for sentimental literature, Jane Tompkins concludes that literature cannot be defined through a single lens—there are too many variables and nuanced narratives that can fall into that category. She argues that the value of a literary work is not fixed, and by interpreting a variety of American texts that earlier critics chose to ignore or dismiss, Tompkins creates a new lens with which to view these often-neglected novels (*Sensational Designs* 196). She argues:

> I see them as doing a certain kind of cultural work within a specific historical situation, and value them for that reason. I see their plots and characters as providing society with a means of thinking about itself, defining certain aspects of a social reality which the authors and their readers shared, dramatizing its conflicts, and recommending solutions. (200).

Tompkins sees the value in these texts as coming from their ability to create discussions with their readers about their society, a "social reality" that both the readers and the writers of these works share. As a result, these texts are able to perform a cultural work that allows society to self-consciously look back on itself and recognize the way in which it is constructed.

What is important to note about Tompkins' argument is her focus on the cultural work taking place in sentimental fiction. Each of these sentimental works are creating a dialogue between the writer and reader about the current state of their society, particularly the part of society that is designated as women's domestic sphere. In Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing*, Stowe presents her reader with agency over their narrative, allowing the reader to think about the expectations society places on her through the paralleled expectations on genre. Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Wilson's *Our Nig* recognize society as a social construct and work to present that fictionality to the reader, crafting an awareness for the problems their shared society currently faced in order to effect change. Similarly, in *Little Women*, Alcott presents a narrative located in the shared society of writer and reader in order to point out the problems currently being faced within the woman's sphere and propose solutions by widening the idea of what the woman's sphere can be. In each of these texts, the narrative is located within the reader's social reality, and by reminding the reader of that fact, the reader cannot help but approach the text in the same way that she approaches her personal life. As a result, these sentimental texts force the reader to reflect back on her society and recognize the fictionality of that sphere, hoping that through recognition cultural work can take place to change that society for the benefit of all.

The problem with our current understanding of sentimental fiction is that so often it limits the reader's ability to see these texts as anything more than an affirmation of the domestic sphere—the sentimental tropes of sympathy, moral lessons, expressive emotions, and expected characters become the focus for sentimental study, but when read beyond these expectations and more along the lines of what Tompkins sees in her argument, sentimental fiction offers society a chance to reflect on its social construction as something that can be changed. Sentimental literature thus becomes a genre of cultural works that allows the reader to see her reality in fiction and recognize its problems in order to propose changes that will benefit everyone.

While this study discusses more notable sentimental novels—Stowe, Alcott, Jacobs, and Wilson are authors that have received more recognition by modern literary circles than others—this type of theoretical approach can also be applied to many sentimental novels, allowing us to widen our understanding of sentimentality. In particular, another avenue of this research could look at the ways in which sentimental literature is published and how that type of publication lends itself to postmodern study. While many works of literature in today's society are published in their entirety, many sentimental novels were serialized in periodicals or published over time. The acclaimed "golden age of periodicals" by the *New-York Mirror* fell between the 1820s and 1870s, paralleling the time in which sentimental literature was most common and most popular (Price and Smith 5). The periodical became a central form of information in nineteenth-century American culture, and it became commonplace in American homes for their content to be read aloud for entertaining friends and family, thus establishing a tradition of "parlour literature" to be published in periodicals (qtd. in Price and Smith 7). Sentimental women writers like E.D.E.N. Southworth, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sara Willis Parton (also known as Fanny Fern), Louisa May Alcott, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Caroline Chesebro', Susan Warner, and many more often published their work in periodicals, with a few of those serialized works later being published as novels for the general public.[37] What is unique about these serialized works, though, is their ability to be written over a period of time and actively engage in conversation with their society. Similar to our discussion concerning Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing* and her dialogic communication with other authors and readers through the guise of fiction, many sentimental works serialized in periodicals can be analyzed in the same way; Stowe's writing is not a singular occurrence, but rather just one example of how sentimental writers crafted metafictional texts through this form of publication. With the large number of works published in this way, a closer look at serialized sentimental fiction is just one way in which this study can be further expanded.

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[37] Periodicals have recently seen a resurgence in literary and bibliographic studies, with one area of research revolving around women's writing published in periodicals. See Anne E. Boyd's "'What! Has She Got Into the *Atlantic*?': Women Writers, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the Formation of the American Canon" (1998).

By being able to publish their fiction over time, these sentimental writers were provided a rare opportunity to let their writing be influenced by their society as well as respond to that society as it progressed. These women writers were able to respond to contemporary concerns as well as respond to their readers' criticisms and alter their narrative to meet the desires of the reader. This active dialogic narrative can be found in many sentimental works because of their periodical publications, and as a result, this feminist metafictional lens can be applied to a wider variety of sentimental fiction than this study's primary texts. With this in mind, the sentimental literary canon that currently exists can be expanded to include lesser known sentimental writers like Caroline Chesebro' by exploring serialized sentimental fiction in this way.[38]

Through expanding this study to encapsulate more sentimental women writers, our current understanding of sentimental fiction and sentimentality in general can only grow. While research over the past fifty years has created a resurgence of women writers in literary study, sentimental literature is still a period of our American history that has yet to be fully recovered. A possible reason for this lack of resurgence lies in modern critics and readers' perceptions of sentimentality as emotional, sensational, or even antithetical to today's culture. As the twenty-first century progresses towards equality between men and women, American women are being promoted more and more as financially, socially, and sexually independent; when the roles of twenty-first century women are compared to that of nineteenth-century women, some may see the differences as a binary between the past and present—women's roles were limited by the domestic sphere in the nineteenth-century, something twenty-first century women believe they have progressed away from over time.

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[38] For more information on Caroline Chesebro', see Nina Baym's *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870*, Chapter 8 entitled "Caroline Chesebro,'" and James L. Machor's *Reading Fiction in Antebellum America: Informed Response and Reception Histories, 1820-1865*, Chapter 6 entitled "Mercurial Readings: The Making and Unmaking of Caroline Chesebro'."

However, when comparing women of the nineteenth century with women of the twenty-first century, there are more similarities than differences that relate the two eras into one history of womanhood. In particular, contemporary women's roles have been noted to suffer the same social constraints as that of the woman's sphere—as Anita Harris notes in her study *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*:

> Power, opportunities, and success are all modeled by the "future girl"—a kind of young woman celebrated for her 'desire, determination and confidence' to take charge of her life, seize chances, and achieve her goals . . . there is a process of creation and control at work in the act of regarding young women as the winners in a new world. In holding them up as the exemplars of new possibility, we also actively construct them to perform this role. (1)

Just as we've seen through nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, the female gender role as a social construction continues to this day—the role has progressed from that of the domestic sphere into this new type of true womanhood. Women of the twenty-first century have more freedoms and opportunities than that of their nineteenth-century counterparts, but the way in which society functions by establishing socially constructed roles remains the same. By opening modern literary studies to encapsulate the sentimental novel, modern readers will be able to recognize their own society as a social construct through sentimentality's feminist metafictional content. Through this reading, modern readers will be able to gleam a fresh perspective towards sentimental fiction, a wider understanding for what these women were confronted with in society's complex construction, and how their self-conscious fiction creates an awareness in modern-day readers of how similar both societal foundations are. By exploring sentimental fiction for the ways in which it plays with sentimental genre conventions, modern readers can learn from their female predecessors, creating new subject-positions for what these nineteenth-century women experienced in their society, and will be provided a more complex and in-depth look into an era of American literature whose lessons can still be applied to today's socially constructed society.

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