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**Wicked Widows, Crazy Spinsters, and Competent Heroines:
The Single Woman in Sentimental Fiction**

**A Thesis
in
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of English**

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ABSTRACT

Wicked Widows, Crazy Spinsters, and Competent Heroines:

The Single Woman in Sentimental Fiction

Lynne Gaetz

Sentimental fiction, a female-authored genre that was immensely popular in nineteenth-century America, has been derided by critics for its simplistic plots and characters. Such fiction is generally about a young female orphan who, after much suffering, learns self-mastery and is rewarded with marriage. Since the 1970s, a number of critics have given critical attention to sentimental fiction. In 1977 and 1985 respectively, Ann Douglas and Jane Tompkins set the terms for almost all subsequent arguments about antebellum female authors. What critics have not done is given particular attention to the models of single women that appear in sentimental fiction.

This study aims to examine such models: the aggressive, evil mother-surrogate, the eccentric fool, and the innocent girl who grows up to be an independent single woman. The evil single woman who torments the heroine and the eccentric spinster appear in such traditional sentimental novels Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *A New England Tale*, Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* and Maria Susanna Cummins' *The Lamplighter*. Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall*, Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* borrow narrative strategies from the sentimental genre, but they also subvert that genre by redefining and radicalizing the virtuous heroine. While most sentimental orphans end up with the promise of marriage and wealth, Frado, Ruth and Linda Brent, the protagonists of Wilson's, Fern's, and Jacobs's texts respectively, seek not marriage, but economic independence as their rewards. In this analysis of single women and three identifiable literary figures, factors that contribute to the depiction of such models are brought to light. Specifically, this study looks at the socio-cultural beliefs surrounding single women, and the extent to which the sentimental authors, particularly Cummins, Warner and Sedgwick, were influenced by such beliefs.

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Introduction

In *Dimity Convictions*, Barbara Welter states that gender roles were clearly defined in the nineteenth century. Women were encouraged to judge themselves by the attributes of 'true womanhood' which were defined by "four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" and reinforced by popular literature, periodicals, etiquette manuals, newspapers, and novels of the time (21). This notion of the true woman arose at a time when America was in the midst of great change: industrialisation was pervasive, men were leaving the farms and entering factories, and women were losing their important place in the "communal productive process" (Douglas 48). Both sexes were attempting to define themselves and their roles. The early nineteenth century also saw an attempt to reform the morals of Americans after an era of individualism and permissiveness. A similar situation was occurring in England; according to Lawrence Stone, the new moral Puritanism was concentrated on the domestic front. While God was in spiritual control, the husband and father, as God's representative in the family, was in control of the household: "With this reassertion of patriarchal authority in the early nineteenth century, the status of women inevitably declined" (Stone 667). Typically, during such a decline in the actual status of woman, the 'ideal woman' was revered, and young ladies were bombarded with messages imploring them to attain unreachable heights of Christian perfection.

According to Stone, through "a combination of repressive measures and vigorous moral and religious propaganda," people were inculcated with the new values (678). In an

article from *Godey's Lady's Book*, titled "Woman's Best Ornament," for example, Reverend B.P. Rogers urges his young female reader to give up her vain, frivolous life and focus on her best ornament, the one most admired by men, which is "the beauty of holiness." This holiness, which the young girl lays "as an humble offering at the Saviour's feet" will have a powerful influence on human hearts. Rogers then cautions his young reader that "a sad, heart-breaking sight" is that of a girl who prostitutes herself on the altar of vanity or fashion and ends up "a cheerless and forsaken" old woman left to "a miserable, remorseful eternity" (*Godey's* np). The exhortation to perfection, then, is coded with a sombre threat.

It was not only male preachers who reinforced the ideal of the true woman. Female-authored domestic, or sentimental, novels became immensely popular, in part because they appeared to reinforce the kinds of views expressed by Reverend Rogers. Authors such as Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Susan Warner and Maria Cummins wrote tales of orphans who overcome hardship and attain this "beauty of holiness," and their contemporary audiences lapped up their work. Hawthorne famously complained to his publisher about "the d----d mob of scribbling women," wondering about "the mystery of the innumerable editions of *The Lamplighter*, and other books neither better or worse" (Geary 365). Hawthorne's dismissal of the 'scribblers' has been echoed by later literary historians. Henry Nash Smith argues that the truly great nineteenth-century writers, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and others, disavowed the culture's dominant value system and dared to tackle social and intellectual issues; in contrast, their female counterparts wrote only sentimental novels on trivial subjects.

Since the 1970s, a number of critics have worked to revise Smith's perspective, giving the "scribbling women" a critical attention that is more sensitive to the ways in which they questioned the dominant ideology even while they apparently endorsed it. In 1977 and 1985 respectively, Ann Douglas and Jane Tompkins set the terms for almost all subsequent arguments about antebellum female authors. In *The Feminization of American Culture* Douglas dissects female sentimentality, which she reads as a form of debased religiosity, in order to examine nineteenth-century American culture from a materialist perspective. She considers the question of why writers like Warner and Cummins were popular and how they were co-opted by the church to endorse conservative ideals. Much as her tendency to condemn the female novelist curiously reflects the condemnation of previous male critics, Douglas nevertheless offers a sustained (rather than merely dismissive) examination of domestic fiction that helped bring attention and interest to that long-neglected body of work. In *Sensational Designs*, Jane Tompkins responds directly to Douglas, refuting the notion that sentimental fiction was politically and socially impotent. For Tompkins, the true power of the sentimental novelists lay in their ability to educate their readers in Christian perfection, and she argues that such a form of education constituted a revolutionary act.

Smith and Douglas agree on some of the texts' weaknesses: they have justifiably criticized the flat characters, the unlikely plots, and the excess of tears and religiosity in sentimental fiction. Furthermore, such fiction smacks of propaganda mainly because of its insistence on promoting the model of the passive, virtuous female. Unlike Douglas and Smith, however, Tompkins refuses to call such stock characteristics defects and argues

against the comparison of sentimental fiction with other works. She states that literature should be valued for what it represents, preferring to see domestic fiction as “doing a certain kind of cultural work within a specific historical situation” (200). In the following study I situate myself somewhere between the critical perspectives of Tompkins and Douglas: while I agree that the novels generally have certain weaknesses, I also acknowledge that the flat characters and sensational plots have intriguing allegorical and symbolic dimensions. Moreover, there are texts identifiably sentimental that rise above the genre’s codification and perform a type of subversion.

Smith notes that, while Hawthorne and Melville were exploring the darkness of the psyche, woman’s fiction was attracting a growing middle class “which craved not challenge but reassurance” (4). Such generalizations are, however, always problematic: some of the scribbling women challenge the audience even as they employ sentimental tropes. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a peculiar hybrid, both a political text and a text that educates its female readership through its celebration of sentimentality. Furthermore, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* breaks from the ‘orphan on a quest’ model, for it is populated with slave owners and slaves, and the title character dies before he finds his earthly rewards; Uncle Tom’s death is, according to Tompkins, “the story of the crucifixion” (134). For both Douglas and Tompkins, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a sort of critical proving ground: Douglas argues that the novel finally offers an ineffectual sentimentality, in which moral transformations have no real impact on material conditions, and Tompkins maintains that the novel is morally potent and politically revolutionary, prompting its readership to reject slavery. Subsequent novelists took up Stowe’s hybrid

form, finding in it the potential to address a large range of political issues. In Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall*, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig: or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, the authors examine writing, gender and race—an examination that moves them outside what Douglas conceives of as a purely conservative moment. Fern, Jacobs and Wilson take up the conventional plot of the young-girl-coming-of-age tale, but they redefine the virtuous heroine. Essentially, in their texts true womanhood and Christian piety are at once idealized and interrogated. I intend to examine both the 'traditional' sentimental novels, such as Sedgwick's *A New England Tale*, Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, and Cummins' *The Lamplighter*, and the more subversive texts by Fern, Jacobs and Wilson, in order to view the ways in which the works represent and interrogate the figure of the single woman.

Single women do not generally fare that well in most nineteenth-century novels. In 1950, Dorothy Yost Deegan completed a study about single women in American novels, restricting herself to an examination of three 'best book' lists compiled by Asa Don Dickinson. From a list of 394 titles written from 1851 to 1935, Deegan searched for portrayals of unmarried women and found that they appear as major characters in only seven novels. (With the exception of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, sentimental fiction was excluded from Dickinson's list). In just over one-third of the novels, single women appear as very minor, marginalized characters, either admired for their goodness, spirit of altruism and sacrifice, or regarded with pity or ridicule. As an example she cites Vanchie Darlington in Ruth Suckow's *The Folks*, whom the townfolk recognize as "the town's most distinguished spinster, but they wonder where she gets those queer-looking hats"

(qtd. in Deegan 103). Deegan concludes her study by noting that the woman who eschews traditional marriage has not gained a noticeable place in literature or in life over the course of the eighty-four years of literature she examines.

According to Deegan's study, single female characters are rare in the "best books"; conversely, single women play a prominent role in the six sentimental texts that I will examine. For example, in three of the novels, an unmarried or widowed older woman becomes the heroine's guardian. In these novels there are also marginal, eccentric characters who influence the heroines, and in the three subversive texts, the heroine ends up as a single mother. Although some of the writers invoke standard figures—Cummins, for example, offers up Patty Pace as a typical eccentric spinster—most of them give sustained and often sympathetic attention to single women.

In this thesis I investigate three models of single women: the evil mother-surrogate, the eccentric fool, and the innocent girl who grows up to be a self-sufficient single woman. The first chapter examines the single woman who tyrannises the heroine. The evil caregiver, a woman who is often the child's spinster or widowed aunt, is strong, self-supporting and aggressive. In Sedgwick's *A New England Tale*, the nasty Mrs. Wilson reluctantly agrees to become the guardian of her niece, Jane Elton. In Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, the vulnerable, young Ellen Montgomery is sent to the home of her parsimonious, hard-working aunt, Miss Fortune, and in Cummins's *The Lamplighter*, Nan Grant cruelly neglects the young child, Gertrude, who is left in her care. Such evil guardian figures are bitter, lonely women and, as such, offer a monitory counterpart to the young, innocent heroine. Fern, Jacobs and Wilson borrow sentimental tropes, but they

depart from the prototype of their peers. In their narratives, the evil caregiver is not widowed or single; rather, she is a married woman who colludes, with her husband, to torture or neglect the heroine. The subversive authors tend to exclude negative spinster role models, and I will be examining the reasons for such an exclusion.

In Chapter 2, I focus on the figure of the eccentric woman. *A New England Tale's* Crazy Bet plays the role of the astute fool who guides Jane Elton through both the literal and metaphorical wilderness, and *The Lamplighter's* odd Patty Pace exerts a subtle influence on Gertrude Flint's life. *The Wide, Wide World's* Mrs. Vawse, an old widow who is less derided than Crazy Bet and Patty Pace, is nevertheless a figure who lives her life outside the mainstream. Of the three more radical authors, only Fern includes a lunatic in her tale; she creates the tragic figure of Mrs. Leon, an abandoned wife who is relegated to a madhouse in *Ruth Hall*. In the novels of Cummins, Warner and Sedgwick, the heroine's success is offset against such negative models of femininity: should the heroine fail to learn self-mastery, she could end up becoming the acrimonious old woman, or the innocuous, crazy spinster. Because the heroine ultimately learns to control her passions, she ends up with the sentimental novel's prize: marriage and financial security.

In my third chapter, I scrutinize the protagonists who attempt to carve out independent lives for themselves. *Ruth Hall*, *Linda Brent* and *Frado* all become single mothers, and they turn to writing in order to become more financially independent. Fern, Jacobs and Wilson appear, at first glance, to be inherently incompatible authors: Fern was a free white woman, Wilson was a 'free' northern mulatto woman, and Jacobs was a southern mulatto slave who escaped to the North. Certainly it is problematic to compare

the condition of the slave woman to that of the free woman who has the rights, privileges and respect that are denied the slave. However, Fern, Wilson and Jacobs do share a common ground: as women they were without political or economic power. Because of their unmarried status, the three were sexually vulnerable and not fully in possession of their children. These authors have other points of commonality: their texts are semi-autobiographical accounts of women who look for freedom from a form of captivity, and who choose writing as a method of surmounting their economic hardships.

Just as the characters Ruth, Frado and Linda turned to writing to support themselves, many of the sentimental authors were single or widowed and were forced to earn a living. Warner never married, and turned to the profession of writing to help her downwardly-mobile family. Sedgwick was an accomplished, unmarried writer who, as Nina Baym points out, "might have taught Maria Cummins . . . that a woman did not need to be ashamed of being unmarried; the single life as she exemplified it was neither wasted nor useless" (*Novels* xv). Cummins remained unmarried and lived with her prosperous family in Dorchester. Fern was left widowed and destitute, and turned to writing to feed her children; like Ruth Hall, she became financially independent (Fern remarried but her views on women's independence generally did not waver). After Wilson's husband deserted her, she wrote her narrative with the express desire to support herself and her son. Jacobs, a single mother, tells her potentially hostile and disbelieving audience the story of her escape from slavery to freedom and independence.

When such writers had an intimate knowledge about the trials that single women endured, why did so many of the sentimental authors resort to depicting the highly

conventional figures of orphans, spinsters, and evil mother-surrogates, and why do so many of the tales end in marriage? Douglas argues that these writers could not ignore their audience, and that the transactions between buyer and seller shaped the content and form of their novels: "They inevitably confused theology with religiosity, religiosity with literature, and literature with self-justification. They attempted to stabilize and advertise in their work the values that cast their position in the most favourable light" (9). Baym concurs with Douglas and notes that "when female characters *were* strongly individualized, reviewers were apt to object" (*Novels* 99).

According to Baym, sentimental heroines "are not individuals, are not mixed, and certainly have no secrets to be laid bare. They are 'Woman'" (*Novels* 98). All are, for example, physically beautiful. Jane Elton transforms from a pale, sad child into a pretty, "handsome" youth (55), Ellen Montgomery is sweet, lovely and studious, and Gertrude Flint, although originally considered plain, matures into a striking beauty with "great dark eyes, . . . a splendid head of hair" and "a remarkable figure" (289, 291). Ruth Hall is beautiful, with her curls and "her eye bright, her smile winning, and her voice soft and melodious"(6), and Linda Brent is a lovely mulatto, whose beauty is paradoxically also a curse: "that which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave" (27). Finally, Frado Smith is beautiful, "with long, curly black hair, and handsome, roguish eyes, sparkling with an exuberance of spirit" (17). Physical beauty is clearly as important for the nineteenth-century female protagonist as it is for fairy-tale heroines like Cinderella, Beauty and Snow White.

Sentimental heroines are pure and beautiful; in contrast, the villains are morally bankrupt, unattractive evil women. Nan Grant, for example, is “an ill-looking woman at best” (49), and Miss Fortune Emerson is sharp-nosed and odd-looking. The sentimental writers were not alone in filling their tales with standard, stereotypical literary figures. According to John Morris, stereotyping, as a literary technique, “proved to be particularly effective and influential during the unprecedented era of industrialisation which really began to shape literature in the 1840s” (1). Morris states that all writers, and not simply women, relied on the use of ‘types’ in both America and Britain: “In the nineteenth century . . . we have what is arguably the first age in which for a number of major writers stereotyping became *the* key method of not only satirizing but delineating characters” (2). Tompkins makes the argument that stereotyped characters have intrinsic value, offering a “cultural shorthand” to the reader: “stereotyped characters, rather than constituting a defect in these novels, was what allowed them to operate as instruments of cultural self-definition” (xvi). However, Tompkins has the tendency to overestimate the complexity and rebelliousness of sentimental heroines. Ellen Montgomery, for example, with her passive acquiescence to her beloved John’s every desire, presents a questionable model of autonomy.

In addition to the conventional heroine and villain, there is a regular formulaic plot in much sentimental fiction. In *A New England Tale*, *The Lamplighter*, and *The Wide, Wide World*, the characters develop in a popular narrative pattern that closely resembles such fairy tales as *Cinderella*: a young girl finds herself alone in the world, submits to an evil mother-surrogate, finds that her living standard lowers dramatically,

gets treated as a servant, finds a fairy-godmother (a slightly older woman who becomes her spiritual guide), successfully overcomes hardship, and marries into financial security. Even small details overlap: Cinderella wears rags and Ellen Montgomery is forced to wear ugly slate-grey stockings.

There are compelling similarities between fairy tales and sentimental fiction. Intriguingly, just as sentimental fiction is female-authored, the original *Cinderella* tale stemmed from a matriarchal tradition; early versions of the tale feature a girl who “actively seeks help and uses her wits to attain her goal which is not marriage but recognition” (Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art* 30). Later authors such as Madame Gabrielle de Villeneuve further reworked many tales to address young females: “the code of the tale was to delude them into believing they would be realising their goals in life by denying themselves” (Zipes, *Fairy Tales as* 31). These literary fairy tales had certain key features: “the social function of the fairy tale must be didactic and teach a lesson that corroborates the code of civility as it was being developed at that time” (Zipes, *Fairy Tale as* 33). Nineteenth-century American women carried on this fairy-tale tradition, but instead of telling their tales in upper-class salons, these mainly middle-class writers ensconced themselves in their homes and reworked the genre to reflect nineteenth-century social and religious concerns.

Although the domestic writers borrow narrative strategies from the fairy tale, they also deviate from that genre. Sentimental heroines, unlike Beauty or Cinderella, begin with endearing imperfections; Gertrude Flint, for example, has a nasty temper that she must learn to subdue. Domestic writers also aimed to give the tales a more realistic

appearance: a hardworking aunt replaces the magical evil stepmother, a pious and concerned neighbour takes the place of the fairy godmother, miraculous events are replaced by more mundane, yet still improbable coincidences (for example, wealthy, long-lost relatives appear at opportune moments), and the orphan child is saved not by the intervention of the supernatural, but by her Christian faith. The heroine must not only find her earthly prince, but also connect with her heavenly father. Even if the sentimentalist authors aimed for a higher realism, however, their tales are not realistic. Furthermore, the nineteenth-century tales, while promising a better afterlife, retain the 'fairy-tale' prize—although the orphans do not join royal families, they ultimately receive a financial reward. Gertrude Flint's father returns with the promise of wealth and protection, as does Willie Sullivan, Ellen Montgomery's marriage to John Humphreys reinstates her in a bourgeois lifestyle with servants, and Jane Elton's marriage with Mr. Lloyd promises financial security and a return to the living standard that she enjoyed before her father squandered the family's money. Even Ruth Hall's tale ends with financial security. The authors of these didactic tales repeat over and over that true love and peace will arrive with the Father in Heaven, but for the white heroines, piety and self-control equally result in the earthly rewards of financial security and a life of relative leisure.

Tompkins disputes the notion that sentimental fiction has any relation to the fairy tale. Clearly Tompkins is correct when one examines the texts written by black authors: the fairy-tale prizes do not cross racial lines, and the mulatto heroines (Frado Smith and Linda Brent) are not finally compensated financially to the same extent as their white sisters. Tompkins states that novels written by white authors are "trials of faith—the story

of Job and *Pilgrim's Progress*—spiritual ‘training’ narratives in which God is both saviour and persecutor” (183). Certainly Tompkins has a point: the heroines of novels like *The Wide, Wide World* and *A New England Tale* are “shaped by obedience, self sacrifice, and faith” (184). However, even the emphasis on religiosity has some relation to the oral tradition of fairy tales; Bruno Bettelheim states that “fairy tales abound in religious motifs; many Biblical stories are of the same nature as fairy tales” (13). Furthermore, he notes that most folk tales began in highly religious periods, thus the tales deal with religious themes; when religion is less emphasised, certain tales (Grimms’ “Our Lady’s Child,” for example) fall out of favour. Indeed, one could speculate that the religiosity of sentimental fiction may be part of the reason that it, too, fell out of favour for almost a century. In spite of Tompkins’s assertion to the contrary, fairy tales and spiritual narratives are not mutually exclusive.

The ‘scribbling women’ yoked the spiritual journey with the fairy tale to produce their own version of moral and religious allegory. The good characters in sentimental fiction are attractive and pious, and the evil ones are usually ugly religious hypocrites; as in moral and religious allegories, the good triumph and the evil suffer. The three identifiable literary figures that sentimental authors employ represent such stock characteristics. The wise and eccentric hag, living outside society’s conventions, is able to enter the homes of the hypocritical and speak the truth; at the same time, the hag is somewhat pathetic and pitiable. The evil caregiver, usually an older, unattractive single woman, is able to work and provide for herself and to express her natural aggression, but her bitter and evil characteristics ensure that she will suffer horribly in the end.

The orphan, in a quest to deny her own independence, hate, aggression, and folly, becomes the pure pious woman. "Woman," therefore, is split into parts: the acceptable true woman and the unacceptable sub-categories of witch and aggressor. Jane Elton, Gertrude Flint and Ellen Montgomery, for example, face persecution by an evil caregiver and, with the aid of a female guide, learn how to swallow their anger, forgive their persecutors, and accept their lot on earth. Thus Jane, Ellen and Gertrude repress the aggressive, angry and independent sides of themselves. On the other hand, Fern merges the fragmented heroines: Ruth Hall is at once pure and angelic, aggressive, and eccentric, all the while remaining one-dimensionally 'good.' Jacobs's Linda Brent goes further than Ruth and retains her goodness while having two children out of wedlock and challenging the patriarchal and racist society in which she was raised. Cummins, Warner and Sedgwick essentially offer a "coming-of-age" tale, in which the heroine ends up with a husband and a middle-class home, whereas Fern, Jacobs and Wilson redefine and radicalize the virtuous heroine: Ruth Hall, Linda Brent and Frado Smith become independent single mothers and, unlike traditional sentimental heroines, they challenge patriarchal and racial norms.

Chapter 1

The Wicked Widows

Mary Kelley argues that men are the villains in sentimental fiction: “Although the sentimentalists espoused the ministers’ view that both man and woman were prone to the sin of selfishness, they chose to focus upon man’s, and not woman’s transgressions” (“The Sentimentalists” 14). Kelly does have a point—the male characters often display a shocking disregard for their wives and children. In Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World*, for example, Ellen’s father unfeelingly sends his young daughter on a long journey and doesn’t bother to warn his sister of Ellen’s arrival. His business practices bankrupt the family, and he insists on separating Ellen and her mother during the last year of Mrs. Montgomery’s life. In Fern’s *Ruth Hall*, Ruth’s father coldly allows her and her children to become impoverished, and in Sedgwick’s *A New England Tale*, Jane Elton’s vain and selfish father engages rashly in one speculation after another and loses the family’s money. Although many men in domestic fiction are irresponsible husbands and neglectful fathers, they are not, I want to argue, the central villains; that role is reserved for women.

The “evil woman” myth has appeared throughout our literary history, often in the form of the Eve-like temptress. However, the sentimental novelists reject the image of woman as temptress or as sexual prey: “they insisted that male-female relations could be conducted on a plane that allowed for feelings other than lust” (Baym, *Woman’s* 26). In nineteenth-century woman’s fiction, evil comes in the guise of a mother-figure. In the

works of all six authors examined in this thesis, there is an evil female guardian who torments the heroine. In *A New England Tale*, for example, Mrs. Wilson is a widow who is raising her children on her own, and, in *The Wide, Wide World*, Aunt Fortune is an unmarried, hardworking and parsimonious woman when Ellen Montgomery enters her home. In *The Lamplighter*, Nan Grant's husband has disappeared at sea, and, although she struggles, she is able to support herself, her son and Gertrude. In most conventional sentimental fiction, this caregiver is unmarried when the heroine enters her home.

The treatment of this evil female figure differs in the works of the subversive authors. In Fern's *Ruth Hall*, Jacobs's *Incidents* and Wilson's *Our Nig*, a married couple, rather than a spinster or widowed aunt, persecutes the helpless heroine. The husband neglects or preys on the innocent orphan, but his wife is particularly cruel: Mrs. Hall, for example, torments her widowed daughter-in-law and plots to deprive Ruth of her children, Mrs. Flint despises Linda and blames the helpless orphan for attracting the lust of her malevolent husband, and Mrs. Belmont sadistically beats Frado. These married women are as outspoken, domineering, passionately aggressive and evil as the spinsters and widows in more traditional tales. However, because the evil caregiver is generally a more peripheral figure in the works of Fern, Jacobs and Wilson, their representation of her will be dealt with more thoroughly in the chapter devoted to independent heroines.

In the works of the more conservative sentimental authors, an unmarried evil female dominates and torments the heroine. Why is the caregiver most often an unmarried older woman? It is important to note that women have generally held the role of caregiver to children, so it is an obvious plot device to send the orphans to an unmarried female

relative. On the other hand, as the main caretaker of the child, the female caregiver is “consequently by far the major object of the child’s ambivalence” (Huang 6). According to Bettelheim, the fairy tale separation of the mother into the good mother and evil mother-surrogate is “a means of preserving an internal all-good mother when the real mother is not all-good, but [such a separation] also permits anger at this bad ‘stepmother’ without endangering the goodwill of the true mother, who is viewed as a different person” (69). Accordingly, Jane Elton, Gertrude Flint and Ellen Montgomery are able to preserve the image of the good real mother, even if that real mother’s goodness is questionable.

The shortcomings of True Womanhood come into relief when one examines the real mothers in sentimental fiction. In Warner’s novel, for example, Mrs. Montgomery is pious and passive, yet her situation clearly requires that she have a certain degree of aggression and spunk. She submissively accepts the decisions of her thoughtless and selfish husband; the family becomes bankrupt, and Mrs. Montgomery ends up dying without the company of her daughter, the only person she seems to love. Nonetheless, Ellen consistently loves her true mother and ignores her faults. When Ellen finds herself with a mother replacement in Miss Fortune Emerson, she feels the intense anger which would be justifiable had it been aimed at the true mother who had abandoned her. With the splitting of the mother, Ellen can love her true mother, despise and then learn to forgive the false mother, Aunt Fortune, and finally love the new ‘godmother,’ Alice Humphreys. If the child’s aunt generally plays the role of ‘evil stepmother,’ the actual mother is pious, ineffectual but ultimately blameless.

In Sedgwick's *A New England Tale*, the mother-surrogate is a widow who maintains the family business after her husband's death. Widows in mid-nineteenth-century America had, unlike their European counterparts, a certain vulnerability, but the American widow was in a better financial position; she was permitted to administer and use her own property during marriage. In fact, widows had the potential to be impressive figures. However, there was a shift in the status of women during the nineteenth century, and such a shift influenced the public perception of widowhood. Douglas notes that widows of previous eras were a powerful force in the community, but by the early nineteenth century, "the independent woman with a mind of her own had ceased to be considered of high value" (51).

Multiple factors contributed to this decline in the status of widows. With increasing industrialization, women no longer had a place in the communal productive process: "Middle-class women in the Northeast after 1830 were far more interested in the purchase of clothing than the making of cloth" (Douglas 51). Women also lost some significant legal privileges including the right to vote and to practice as midwives. By the early nineteenth-century, single and widowed women were symbols of frail unproductivity and were seen as "pitiful charity cases" (Douglas 51). In *A New England Tale*, widows are prominent characters, and the first widow that the reader is introduced to is the frail and unproductive model.

The nineteenth-century writer, Grace Greenwood, defines true feminine genius as "ever timid, doubtful, and clingingly dependent; a perpetual childhood" and of course such a woman would be unfit for the duties involved in maintaining and managing the finances

of a household (qtd. in Welter, *Dimity* 29). Jane's mother is a clinging, dependent type and is described in a not altogether favourable light. Mrs. Elton has "that passiveness which, we believe, is exclusively a feminine virtue" (10). Sedgwick then shrewdly questions her previous comment: "if virtue it may be called." Mrs. Elton watches her husband incur debts which they had no means of repaying, and "she perceived he was gradually sinking into vice . . . yet she silently, and without an effort acquiesced in his faults" (10). By pretending that she and her husband still have money, and by keeping up a social facade that is beyond their means, Mrs. Elton illustrates her dishonesty; but Sedgwick reminds us that very few people are without faults: "narrow is the way of perfect integrity" (11). Thus, although Sedgwick criticises the timid passivity of Jane's mother, she also warns the reader to refrain from harshly condemning a woman whose actions are the result of "habitual passiveness" (10). When Mrs. Elton finds herself a destitute widow, she becomes irresolute, spiritless and despondent. Sedgwick, a single woman herself, portrays two contrasting images of widowhood and, curiously, reserves her most severe condemnation for the capable widow.

While Jane's mother passively allows the family to fall into ruin, Mrs. Wilson is financially savvy and is "a careful fellow-worker with her husband in the acquisition of their property" (23). Furthermore, Mrs. Wilson wrests authority from her husband, who was "easily cozened by the shadow, when his wife retained the substance" (23). When her husband dies, Mrs. Wilson is left financially independent; she capably manages the family property and is "eagle eyed" regarding their finances (104). Although Sedgwick subtly criticises Mrs. Elton's passivity, she holds nothing back in her criticism of Mrs. Wilson

who is, in every respect, the opposite of a True Woman. Mrs. Wilson is aggressive and active rather than submissive. Her pride has never been subdued, thus she becomes “artful and trickish . . . sordid and ostentatious” (23). While popular manuals of the era insist that a woman “needs a protector” (Welter, *Dimity* 28), Mrs. Wilson firmly rejects a return to her previous role as wife and *chooses* to remain single and independent. When a merchant proposes to her, she turns him down because she will not “jeopardise her estates and liberty” (44). Furthermore, Mrs. Wilson is careful to project a Christian exterior to her community, but her piety is hollow and her attendance at weekly meetings is only for show. Mrs. Elton is gently censured for her excessive passivity and fragility, whereas Mrs. Wilson is thoroughly condemned for her false religiosity, her love of money, and her scandalous aggression.

Although Sedgwick criticises any excess of ‘true womanly’ passivity, she nonetheless endorses the four virtues of True Womanhood; she simply warns the reader that such virtues must be tempered with sound judgement. Jane is pious, pure and submissive, but when conditions are unbearable, she can stand up for herself much more ably than her mother could. When she is falsely accused of robbing Mrs. Wilson, for example, Jane states: “I shall not remain another night beneath a roof where I have received little kindness” (102). Jane’s wisdom and good judgement are also guiding principles when she chooses a mate: while her mother chose an unworthy, frivolous man as a partner, Jane rejects the amoral Edward Erskine in favour of the upstanding father figure, Mr. Lloyd. Jane’s mother represents the dangers of excessive passivity, and Jane exemplifies what the ideal woman should be.

When Jane finds herself in Mrs. Wilson's home, the reader is presented with contrasting female images: Mrs. Wilson uses her domineering personality to make Jane obey her and Jane, in turn, maintains a passive equilibrium to counteract her aunt's aggression. Mrs. Wilson assumes the voice of paternalistic authority: "My word must be your law; you must not hesitate to do any thing that I require of you; never think of asking a reason for what I command—it is very troublesome and unreasonable to do so" (37). Jane, on the other hand, is reasonable rather than authoritative, quietly acquiescing to her aunt's wishes and patiently enduring her aunt's unfairness. When, for example, Mrs. Wilson unjustly accuses Jane of helping Elvira sneak out of the house and attacks Jane as a hypocrite, Jane reacts to her aunt's rage with "a voice so sweet, so composed, that it sounded like the breath of music following the howlings of an enraged animal" (46). At the same time, Jane doesn't hesitate to preach to her aunt about Christian theology, and warns her aunt that "we are in the chamber of death . . . as you will then wish your soul to be lightened of all injustice" (46). Jane's method of patiently answering her aunt and of referring to Christian scripture does not change the older woman who "preferred incurring every evil, to the relinquishment of one of the prerogatives of power" (47). Sedgwick's moral allegory aims to educate the reader in the importance of sharing and helping others, and the aggressive individualists like Mrs. Wilson run counter to that ideal. As Elizabeth Barnes notes, Mrs. Wilson even treats her charity as an item of exchange; Jane is in her aunt's debt because Mrs. Wilson has given her a home (81).

Although Jane has every reason to hate her aunt, she does not harbour such feelings. Other sentimental heroines must learn Christian stoicism and forgiveness, but

Jane enters Mrs. Wilson's home with the ability to accept abuse with equanimity. Mrs. Elton teaches her daughter such traits "more by the example than the precepts"; Jane sees her mother "bear with meekness the asperity and unreasonableness of her father's temper, and often turn away his wrath with a soft answer" (24). Jane's mother also "sought to fortify her child's mind with Christian principles" (25). Thus Jane enters the home of Mrs. Wilson with a strong religious foundation and "a habit of self-command" (24). When Jane does feel oppressed by her lack of freedom in the Wilson's home, she is comforted by Mary Hull and Mr. Lloyd, who counsel her in Christian philosophy. During one conversation with Mary, Jane discusses the possibility of becoming a teacher's assistant; however, the young orphan subsequently makes "a strong mental effort to subdue that longing after liberty," and after a short struggle, she is able to accept her situation (59). Jane then assures Mary that everyone in her aunt's family is kind to her (although it is patently untrue) and she chooses to stay with her aunt. At every turn, when Mrs. Wilson is unreasonable or when she unfairly accuses Jane of something, the older woman's venom is consistently counteracted with Jane's habitual self-discipline.

In the world of sentimental fiction, the bad characters are punished and the good are rewarded. Mrs. Wilson's punishment begins with the hate that she engenders in her own children; their hearts rise "against a parent's tyranny" (47). In one tirade that is inadvertently self-mocking, Mrs. Wilson states: "I allow no child in my house to know right from wrong" (36), and her statement proves to be prescient. The aggressive and unreasonable woman witnesses her children lying to her, stealing from her, running away from her, and eventually blaming her for their failings. She has inadequately filled her role

as mother, and when her son gets involved in increasingly despicable activities, she forsakes him. Jane pleads with Mrs. Wilson to pay for David's lawyer, but her aunt refuses, and in an impassioned debate about God, repentance and the soul, Jane challenges her aunt: "You deceive yourself. You may deceive others; but God is not mocked" (149). For a few moments, Mrs. Wilson is "conscience stricken." Jane confidently goes on to present "so true an image of her selfishness, her pride, her domestic tyranny, and her love of money, that [Mrs. Wilson] could not but see that it was her very self" (149). When Mr. Lloyd enters the room, Mrs. Wilson is in a troubled stupor and she then reaches a state of frenzy when Jane reads David's last letter to her. David writes: "If I have a soul . . . eternity will be spent in cursing her who has ruined it" (155). David then accuses his mother of false piety; he describes her religion as a "cloak to hide [her] hard, cruel heart," and he asks that God "reward [her] according to [her] deeds!" (155). The letter briefly swells "the clamours of Mrs. Wilson's newly awakened conscience" but the effect is temporary, and she reverts to her deluded self (156).

Mrs. Wilson is tortured by the conduct of her children and she is eventually destroyed by physical illness. During her slow and agonising decline, only her daughter, Elvira, tries unsuccessfully to make it to her sick bed. Jane, who had earlier vowed never to set foot in the Wilson home, does what many sentimental heroines do: she forgives her cruel aunt and sits by her aunt's deathbed. But no amount of Jane's tender care helps: "Her [Mrs. Wilson's] mind no human comfort could reach" (156). The widow dies a horrible, painful death. To compound the horror of her death, Mrs. Wilson asks neither Jane nor God for forgiveness. In her last rational words, she admits that she is "of sinners

the chief,” but Mr. Lloyd suggests that her final words may simply have been uttered with the hope of redemption: “professions and declarations have crept in among the protestants, to take the place of the mortifications and penances of the ancient church; so prone are men to find some easier way to heaven than the toilsome path of obedience” (157). Thus, Sedgwick suggests that Mrs. Wilson’s final repentance is false and ineffective and that she will deservedly suffer for eternity in Hell. The bad, then, are thoroughly punished.

Why does evil appear in the guise of an independent, opinionated, blunt-speaking unmarried woman in domestic fiction? Perhaps a clue lies in Sedgwick’s comparison of Mrs. Wilson with Jane’s father; Sedgwick writes that they were “originally cast in the same mould, . . . but circumstances had given it a different modification” (23). They are both selfish and avaricious, and they both represent patriarchal authority. But while Mr. Elton is impervious to his wife’s moral example, Mrs. Wilson has no wife to set a moral example for her. Mrs. Wilson also differs from Mr. Elton in the practice of religion: while he dismisses religious teachings, she makes insincere attempts to embrace feminine virtues by doing work for the church. Of course, such attempts only emphasize her lack of feminine holiness. By making Mrs. Wilson dominant and powerful and by comparing her with Mr. Elton, Sedgwick prompts a reaction against the masculine female: Jane’s mother has excessive “feminine” passivity and is incapable of running a household, but she is still far better than Mrs. Wilson, the monstrous man-woman.

The monstrous female reappears in *The Lamplighter*, in which Gertrude Flint confronts a loathsome villain named Nan Grant. After Gertrude’s mother dies, Ben Grant

asks his wife to care for the child until his return. Nan is left on her own to raise the child, for Ben “had been gone so long that no one thought he would ever come back” (3). Like Mrs. Wilson, Nan is effectively a widow, but what differentiates them is their economic status. Mrs. Wilson has the leisure time and resources to support her church, but Nan does not even pretend to be concerned about Christian perfection. To the outside world, Mrs. Wilson is a successful and financially self-sufficient woman, whereas Nan Grant lives near the dockyards in an impoverished area. Nevertheless, Nan is far more capable than Jane Elton’s mother; while Mrs. Elton gives up under the weight of poverty, Nan rises to the occasion and becomes a very hard worker. To make ends meet, “she took in washing, and had a few boarders” (9). Nan would have earned enough to support herself but for her son who “always squandered his own and a large part of his mother’s earnings” (9). Like Mrs. Wilson, Nan is a self-sufficient woman.

According to *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, children bring out the beautiful regions of a woman’s nature and make them “tender and sympathetic” (qtd. in Green 29). However, the false mothers are very poor at mothering their own children and they have no trace of tenderness or sympathy. Nan’s son turns out to be as despicable and lawless as Mrs. Wilson’s; Stephen Grant is “an unruly, disorderly young man, spoilt in early life by his mother’s uneven temper and management” (9). In addition to being a bad mother, Nan is “an ill-looking woman at best, her face now was so sufficient an index to her character, that no one could see her thus and afterwards question her right to the title of vixen, virago, scold, or anything else that conveys the same idea” (49). She lives up to her reputation of vixen: her treatment of young Gertrude is brutal. After the child spills some

milk, Nan pulls the child into the house “amidst blows, threats, and profane and brutal language” (3), and the child is then deprived of supper and shut up in a dark attic for the night. In a more vivid act of villainy, Nan grabs Gertrude’s little kitten and flings it into “a vessel of steaming-hot water” (11). Like Mrs. Wilson, Nan is condescending and accusatory; however, Nan is also physically abusive to her charge.

Unlike Jane Elton—and, no doubt, because she lacks Jane’s maternal role model—Gertrude reacts violently to her abuse. After the kitten incident, she flings a stick of wood at Nan “with all her strength” (11). She also freely shouts that she hates Nan, and even after she has left Nan’s house, she throws a stone through Nan’s window. However, Gertrude eventually learns to rein in her anger, and, like Jane, she manages to forgive her abuser. In fact, Gertrude’s tenderness towards Nan surpasses that of Jane towards Mrs. Wilson. During Mrs. Wilson’s illness, Jane regales her aunt with warnings of her soul’s perdition. Gertrude, on the other hand, seeks to minimise Nan’s fears. And Mrs. Wilson’s unrepentant attitude in the face of death is not mimicked by Nan: in her dying days, Nan is “conscience stricken” (165).

While both Mrs. Wilson and Nan Grant are widows, in Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World*, Fortune Emerson is a spinster living with her elderly mother. Like Nan Grant, Miss Fortune is unattractive. In her first letter to her mamma, Ellen describes her aunt: “she is very good looking, or she would be if her nose was not quite so sharp . . . I am sure her eyes are as sharp as two needles. And she don’t walk like other people; at least sometimes. She makes queer little jerks and starts and jumps and flies about like I don’t know what” (111). The odd-looking, sharp-nosed woman contrasts with the lovely,

angelic Ellen. Cummins is indeed explicit that the face is an “index to character” (49), that beauty is the outward reflection of goodness and ugliness is the external manifestation of evil.

Aunt Fortune runs a farm and does all of the household chores herself. Baym suggests that much of Ellen and Aunt Fortune’s conflict stems from “Ellen’s struggle to resist enclosure in a preliterate rural economy, where women’s work is entirely manual and taught by example” (*American* 13). Certainly Ellen is baffled that her Aunt does the dishes, the laundry and the cooking, but Warner’s position regarding bourgeois urban living versus rural economic independence is decidedly ambivalent. In one scene, when Ellen complains that she is not “improving” herself, Miss Fortune dismisses book learning as “crinkumerankums: I wonder what good they’d ever do you” (140). She then criticises the idle lifestyle of Ellen’s mother: “If she had been trained to use her hands and do something useful instead of thinking herself above it, maybe she wouldn’t have had to go to sea for her health just now” (140). Miss Fortune has a point; she offers Ellen a much more capable and physically fit model than that of Ellen’s swooning mother. However, when Ellen does her chores, she feels that she has “wasted time” (141) and she ultimately rejects the model of the active, self-sufficient female exemplified by Fortune.

Baym states that the guardians and caretakers in *The Lamplighter* are more “kind and loving” than those in *The Wide, Wide World* (*Woman’s* 164); Gertrude is, after all, cared for by Trueman Flint while Ellen suffers in the home of Aunt Fortune. But Baym neglects to compare the true villains from both tales: Nan Grant is, in fact, much more abusive than Fortune Emerson. Certainly Miss Fortune works Ellen like a little Cinderella,

forces her to wear unattractive clothing, and withholds communication from Ellen's mother, but Miss Fortune is still a much more sympathetic villain than either Nan Grant or Mrs. Wilson. Miss Fortune doesn't simply put Ellen to work; the older woman works harder than Ellen does, and she keeps Ellen properly clothed, fed and sheltered. In her own way Fortune cares for her niece. When Ellen is sick in bed for two weeks, Fortune "flew about with increased agility . . . Ellen's room was always the picture of neatness; the fire, the wood-fire, was taken care of; Miss Fortune seemed to know by instinct when it wanted a fresh supply" (205). Thus Miss Fortune refuses all offers of help and works herself to the bone to care for, clean up after, medicate and warm her niece. Fortune even has moments of tenderness towards Ellen; when the ill and semi-delirious child begs her mother to touch her forehead, "Miss Fortune softly laid her own upon the child's brow" (206). Evidently Miss Fortune's gruffness belies a softer interior. Fortune and Ellen eventually come to an understanding when Fortune is ill. Ellen does such an uncomplaining job of maintaining the home during Fortune's illness that the older woman develops a grudging respect for her young charge: "At home the state of matters was rather bettered. Either Miss Fortune was softened by Ellen's gentle inoffensive ways and obedient usefulness, or she had resolved to bear what could not be helped" (334).

Because Miss Fortune is not simply a composite of evil qualities, she fares much better than her more cruel counterparts. Thus, while both Nan Grant and Mrs. Wilson suffer and die horribly, Miss Fortune is rewarded; she marries Mr. Van Brundt and together they manage the farm. Nonetheless, Warner is careful to portray Fortune's marriage as less than ideal. During their long engagement, Fortune and Van Brundt are

neither affectionate nor attentive towards each other. Indeed, when Aunt Fortune is sick in bed, Mr. Brundt is around, but he does not go upstairs to visit his fiancée. Later, when he breaks his leg, there is no suggestion that Aunt Fortune bothers to visit him.

Additionally, Warner takes pains to portray the union as passionless. When Mr. Van Brundt tells Ellen of the impending wedding, he makes a “particularly cool statement of his matrimonial views” (424). Later, the narrator describes the marriage as a business arrangement: “The wedding of Miss Fortune and Mr. Van Brunt was a very quiet one. It happened at far too busy a time of year, and they were too cool calculators, and looked upon their union in much too business-like a point of view, to dream of such a wild thing as a wedding tour” (433). Like his new bride, Van Brundt is a self-centered and pragmatic man and “is thought to be quite as keen a looker after the main chance as Miss Fortune herself, only somehow it was never laid against him as it was against her” (380). Miss Fortune’s marriage thus appears to be a cool union based on financial rather than emotional considerations; but it is nevertheless a marriage and not, as it is with *The Lamplighter’s* and *A New England Tale’s* villains, a dreadful death.

For all that Aunt Fortune might fare better than Nan Grant and Mrs. Wilson, the three have some common traits. All the women are older, single and independent, but they are also mean-spirited and filled with anger and aggression. There may be multiple reasons for such a depiction of evil in nineteenth-century domestic fiction. As both Lawrence Stone and Ann Douglas point out, the status of women fell during the early nineteenth century. Welter, too, aptly demonstrates that the pervasive ideal of the True Woman prompted a corresponding suspicion of capable, outspoken women, that the “girl

fetish" flourished while "the American Matron sat on the shelf" (*Dimitry* 3). Once the older female caregiver has lost her youthful, exalted status, she serves as a counterpoint to the beautiful young orphan who is introduced into her home. We also know that the popular press continually promoted the differences between the sexes and suggested that passivity and submissiveness were highly-valued female qualities. And, as Lee Chambers-Schiller observes, the decline in the status of the single woman was represented in the popular culture: "Popular songs such as 'The Old Maid's Lament' and 'My Grandmother's Advice' ridiculed the woman who wiled [sic] away her courting opportunities," and popular stories and poems depicted the unwed as "the devil's subjects, cramped with spite" (25). Women were also repeatedly warned that they could end up as "cheerless and forsaken" spinsters (*Godey's* np); hence Warner, Sedgwick and Cummins were not only influenced by 'true woman' propaganda, but they were also swayed by cultural exhortations against unmarried women.

It is therefore possible that the conventional authors were simply echoing their song and poetry-writing compatriots by presenting strong, authoritarian women as deviant. The capable but nasty spinsters and widows may also represent a certain type of independent feminist that was vilified in the nineteenth century. Mary Wollenstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* was known in the US, but "the publication was met with ridicule" and Mary was denigrated for her opinions and her lifestyle (Ryan 10). The extent to which independent-minded feminists were reviled is evident in the January 1850 edition of *Godey's Lady's Book*, where the editor notes that "woman's rights . . . have broken down the barriers of true modesty, and destroyed the retiring graces of woman's

nature” (*Godey’s* np). The domestic writers were aware of the feminist movement.

Sedgwick notes that the “agitation about women’s rights” has the following result: “the men are shocked and disgusted . . . and the women rather scared and uncertain what to say, or whether to speak at all” (qtd. in Kelly, *Private* 318).

Perhaps domestic writers were, in effect, dramatizing their own confusion about women’s roles and, by juxtaposing an angelic orphan with an aggressively materialistic unmarried woman, questioning whether patriarchal structures should be accepted or rejected. Mary Kelly notes that the literary domestics laboured in a world in which “nine out of ten women married, and for the large majority of them the household remained the focus of occupation”; (*Private* 143) it is therefore hardly surprising that women like Sedgwick were ambivalent about their single status. Such women were “anomalous figures in the eyes of their society” (*Private* 146). In fact, in her private journal Sedgwick attributed bouts of sadness to her “solitary condition” and her “unnatural state” (Kelly, *Private* 244).

It was not only evangelical writers who vilified strongly independent women; even the more outspoken scribbling women internalized social models of acceptable and unacceptable feminine behaviour. Fanny Fern, for example, may have created the independent single woman, Ruth Hall, but she also suggests in her short text, “How Husbands May Rule,” that outspoken women such as Mrs. May ought to be shunned. Mrs. May is the sort of woman who would “make sport” of a housewife for being “ruled” by her husband (*Fern Leaves* 118). If, as Douglas states, “the independent woman with a mind of her own ceased to be considered of high value,” then it is somewhat

understandable that single, independent women became fair game for ridicule even by other single, independent women.

Domineering evil women, then, figure predominantly in sentimental fiction and Cummins, Warner and Sedgwick's novels are no exception. Women like *A New England Tale's* evil Mrs. Wilson and *The Lamplighter's* Nan Grant are presented as lonely, pitiable failures and as object lessons to the orphan. The orphan who gains self-mastery is rewarded with a marriage license and rescued from a solitary, desolate existence, but should the young heroine fail to learn her lessons, her punishment could be a life as a miserable, bitter spinster or widow. The domestic authors were therefore perpetuating the myth that unmarried older women were necessarily unhappy and "cramped with spite," despite their being productive, capable and financially independent members of society.

Chapter 2

The Crazy Spinsters

According to Ilana Dan, “the female fairy tale tends towards the sacred legend: the marvellous helper, in almost all of the texts, is an agent of the sacred power such as an angel or Elijah the Prophet” (14). The ‘Fairy Godmothers’ in sentimental fiction, women such as *The Lamplighter*’s Emily Graham and *The Wide, Wide World*’s Alice Humphreys, are, in a sense, also agents of sacred power: they guide the heroines on the path to religious enlightenment and offer hope for eternal peace. After her mother’s death, for example, when *A New England Tale*’s Jane Elton looks outside and notices that the birds have flown from a tree near her window, her guide, Mary Hull, comforts her: “He who careth for them, will care much more for you” (22). The godmother, who stands on the sidelines but is ever ready to advise the heroine, is the only female character in sentimental fiction who has the qualities that the heroine is striving to attain: Mary Hull, Alice Humphreys and Emily Graham are pious, wise, and more self-possessed than the heroines’ overly passive mothers. Often almost otherworldly in their moral perfection—and therefore implicitly destined, like Stowe’s little Eva, to die before they ever experience the matrimonial bliss that will be the heroine’s reward for her religious growth—such helpers form a part of a system of female guidance for the sentimental novels’ protagonists. The other part consists of what Cathy Davidson deems the “female guide who exists outside normal conventions” (ix), the eccentric or mad woman who consistently figures in sentimental fiction.

To a certain extent, the eccentric woman guides by negative example, offering a cautionary model about what could happen to the woman not checked or directed by the wisdom of a husband. But she also offers the opportunity for the heroine to demonstrate a compassion and Christian goodness that is potentially unfashionable yet an index to her eventual moral triumph. There is no question that the female eccentric is open to ridicule from the unenlightened. *The Lamplighter's* Patty Pace, for example, wears comical clothing and speaks nonsensically, and *A New England Tale's* crazy Bet decorates herself in leaves and communicates with the dead. However, not all of the female eccentrics are ridiculous: Susan Warner creates a more sympathetic eccentric widow with her portrayal of *A Wide, Wide World's* Mrs. Vawse. In *Ruth Hall*, Mary Leon is not really insane but her husband, and by extension, the patriarchy, deems her so. Philip Martin notes that in western culture, the fool (or village idiot) is gentle and harmless, but "the female lunatic is assigned a very different role. Her eccentricity is less easily tolerated" (14). In the works of Sedgwick, Cummins, Warner and Fern, however, the female lunatic is actually tolerated by the good characters.

The sentimental novelists operated within a male-dominated society, and their depictions of the ideal heroine, the aggressive aunt and the lunatic were necessarily responses to that domination. Forceful, aggressive women were derided by the general population, and thus domestic authors tended to portray female aggression in a negative light, just as they tended to allow their depictions of female lunatics to be influenced by contemporary medical beliefs. Nineteenth-century medical practitioners put forth a variety of theories as to why women went insane, building on the starting premise that women

were both mentally and physically inferior to men. There was a general consensus among male medical professionals that women were susceptible to mental illness because “while a man’s robustness protected him to some extent from the injuries of a decadent society, woman’s frailty made her a permanently liable victim”; thus notions about femininity and insanity were intertwined (Martin 32). These medics felt that there were a variety of catalysts for insanity including the “introduction of new religious enthusiasms,” tea drinking, card playing and tight lacing of corsets (Martin 35). An 1860 issue of *Godey’s* linked insanity and “softening of the brain” to “the excitement of life” (Green 136). Even *The Wide, Wide World’s* John Humphrey’s warnings about novel reading were echoed by the nineteenth-century medic, Thomas Trotter, who noted that “to the female mind in particular . . . this species of literary poison [the novel] has been often fatal” (qtd. in Martin 33). The most common reason for insanity was linked to the female passions. Women were considered to be both emotionally and physically hypersensitive, and the female uterus was considered to have a direct effect on the brain. In *An Inquiry Concerning the Indications of Insanity*, John Connolly felt that “the uterus of the unmarried woman ‘is often the cause of mental disturbance of a most formidable aspect’”; and Erasmus Darwin believed that women were prone to the disease of “sentimental love” (qtd. in Martin 31, 37). Essentially the era’s medics believed if women had “regular but not excessive intercourse” (Martin 40), avoided “excitement” or “excessive mental labor” and refrained “from those activities which might challenge the role of men in the power structure of the nation . . . they would be able to fulfil the destiny and promise of

America” (Green 138). Many of the sentimental writers invest their madwomen with excessive passion and highly excitable natures.

In Sedgwick’s *A New England Tale*, the village lunatic is a middle-aged woman who is given the moniker of ‘crazy’ Bet. Bet’s lunacy is attributed to her sustained grief over her lover’s death. On the night before their wedding, Bet’s fiancé drowned, and ever since, Bet has lived in a state of heightened religious sensibility. She believes that she is able to hear the Lord speak, so when Mary Oakley dies, for example, Bet hears a voice saying, “her sins are forgiven” (93). As a token of her own bereavement, Bet is always draped in a piece of fabric that serves as a “badge of mourning” (18). She is considered ‘crazy’ partly because of her unusual wardrobe and partly because of her enigmatic style of speaking. When Bet wipes Jane’s tears, for example, Bet says, “Bottles full of odours, which are the tears of saints” (18).

According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, “the monster woman is simply a woman who seeks the power of self-articulation” (79). But Bet does not seek such power because she is already graced with it. As Davidson notes, “Bet can speak her mind because, by usual social definitions, she has lost it” (viii). When Bet overhears a discussion among Jane’s aunts, Bet’s wisdom is evident: “The quick eye of crazy Bet detected, through their thin guise, [their] pride and hypocrisy and selfishness” (17). Like Shakespeare’s fools who speak in enigmatic rhyme, Bet often delivers her drops of wisdom in verse and song, but when confronted with evil, she admonishes the perpetrators for their lack of compassion and piety in a didactic, evangelical tone. When the aunts demure over whom should take Jane, Bet cries “shame, shame, upon you! . . . Has pride

turned your hearts to stone, that ye cannot shelter this poor little ewe-lamb in your fold” (18).

While women such as Jane Elton work at self-mastery, Bet has “a quickness of feeling” and gives free rein to her passions and her inclinations (18). Crazy Bet also transcends the typical female domestic sphere with her mobility. She roams around New England at will and attends camp meetings, awakenings, and funerals in the various villages on her route. In short, she seeks “every scene of excitement” (16). In contrast, Jane is only permitted to go to school or the market, and is restricted from any further travel. Bet’s role in the novel is much like that of Jane’s aunt: both Bet and Mrs. Wilson are cautionary figures. They provide Jane with examples of what can happen to women who fail to restrain their passions, suggesting implicitly that Jane’s best hope for happiness and matrimony is to learn self-mastery.

Jane is not expected to emulate Bet, but she is, at times, gently guided by the older woman. In one scene, Bet is instructed to meet Jane and to take her through the wilderness to the place where David’s pregnant lover is waiting. Jane clearly lacks confidence in a guide “whose wild and fantastic humours she knew to be impossible for any one to control,” and she is nervous about entering unknown woods (82). Jane’s fears are unfounded, however, as Bet arrives punctually at the meeting place and appears fully aware of her purpose. Bet’s appearance, with a twisted vine wrapped around her head, unsettles Jane, who has to be instructed by Bet on pantheistic philosophy. When Jane begs Bet to remove her leafy head-dress, Bet replies that “there is a charm” in every leaf, and that she is protected from evil while she wears her leafy crown (84). Jane readily

accepts Bet's explanation and timidly asks, "what have I to guard me, Bet?" (84).

"Innocence," Bet calmly answers (84).

Bet influences Jane and adds to the latter's understanding of Christian teaching. When Bet tells Jane that the open fields are Christ's temples, Jane says, "I think all obedient spirits would worship in this sanctuary of nature" (85). Jane then falls on her knees because she catches "a spark of her companion's enthusiasm" and thrills to the beauty of the night and of the open space rimmed by lofty trees (86). When Jane leaves Bet, she looks back and sees the crazy woman "standing between heaven and earth on the very topmost point of a high rock," where she looks "like the wild genius of the savage scene and she seem[s] to breathe its spirit" (87-88). Sedgwick refrains from completely endorsing Bet's brand of spirituality; pantheism and insanity are, after all, linked in Bet's character. Yet Bet's love of nature is clearly less harmful than Mrs. Wilson's love of money and rigid false piety.

Even though Bet respects Jane, Jane is incapable of subduing the older woman. Old John, on the other hand, easily exerts control over Bet, much to Jane's surprise. When Bet arrives at John's cottage, he speaks in a "voice of authority," ordering her to remove her head-dress and stroke her hair back "like a decent Christian woman" (88), and Bet meekly obeys. Sedgwick implies that female freedom and outspokenness will be repressed by the patriarchy; at the end of the novel, Bet is restrained in one place by another man. Mr. Lloyd mistakenly believes that Bet's reason might be restored "by confinement to one place, and one set of objects, and by the sedative influence of gentle manners, and regular habits in her attendants" (164). Unable to respect Bet's wild and

wandering ways, Mr. Lloyd assumes that Bet needs sedating, but in the end he admits that she is untameable.

Bet has unusual dress, customs and speech, but she is respected by the population, although she arouses unfailing mirth in “the young and vulgar” (16). In Cummins’s *The Lamplighter*, the local lunatic, Patty Pace, is first presented as a more pathetic, comical figure than Bet. Willie rushes to tell Gerty and Trueman about “the funniest thing” (74). He states that the old woman “looked so ridiculous,” and he then vividly describes Patty’s unusual wardrobe which includes a trimmed satin gown, goggles, and a laced, oversized bonnet. Willie and Gertrude apparently fall in to the category of the unsympathetic young because Willie finds Patty so amusing that he tells Gerty “it’s lucky you didn’t see her; you’d have laughed from then till this time” (75). And when Gertrude first meets Patty Pace, she thinks that the old woman’s wardrobe is “wonderfully grotesque” (112); at her offer of a drink of pepper water, Gertrude “could only with great difficulty keep from laughing in her [Patty’s] face” (115). Gertrude and Willie are not depicted as mean-spirited; indeed Willie is unfailingly chivalrous and Gertrude patiently interacts with Miss Pace. Nevertheless, they show less tolerance for an old eccentric fool than does Jane Elton.

Old Trueman calls Patty “some poor crazy crittur,” but he is immediately corrected by Willie, who assures him that she may be “queer” but she is definitely not crazy; in fact, she is “bright as a dollar” (75). Gertrude, on the other hand, is less certain about the old woman’s sanity. When Gerty escorts Miss Patty to her home, the old woman carries on a conversation “which at one moment satisfied her visitor she was a woman of sense, and

the next persuaded her that she was either foolish or insane” (115). Patty’s statements are not as enigmatic and poetic as Bet’s, nor does Miss Pace, for all her “wonderful visionary and comprehending powers,” admonish the sinful with verse or scripture (119). Patty appears lunatic mainly because of her highly eccentric wardrobe and her strange preoccupations and ideas. Gertrude laughs at the notion that pepper water could be a preventative for the common cold, for example. Patty’s comments are also nonsensical and comical; when she is at the Grahams, she tells the assembled crowd that General Pace’s family members are all dead, and in the center of the alabaster monument over their graves “was inscribed these lines: ‘Pace’” (210). When Mrs. Graham enquires what the lines were, Patty repeats “Pace, ma’am, Pace; nothing else.” The gathered crowd erupts in “a universal titter,” and Kitty and Fanny are on the verge of “uncontrollable fits of laughter” (210). Both Miss Emily and Gertrude enjoy Patty’s “quaint conversation,” and Patty is a welcome guest of the Grahams because Emily “love[s] to be amused” (120).

With Patty Pace, Cummins partially critiques the construction of the ‘Belle’—a woman preoccupied with her own beauty and with attracting men. Patty’s coquettishness and her fixation on matrimony make her an object of ridicule and mirth, but Belle Clinton’s vanity and self-centeredness are equally the subject of Cummins’s derision. Of course, Belle cannot stand seeing a caricature of herself in the figure of Patty Pace. In one scene Patty visits the Grahams and discusses her two favourite themes, “dress and fashion,” and, as she deliberates on her love of the beautiful, she examines the material of Belle’s dress (211). Belle reacts with indignation, shaking “off the hand of the old lady as if there had been contamination in her touch” (211). Cummins appears to endorse the

view of Reverend Rogers, who harshly judged women who prostituted themselves “on the alter of vanity or fashion” (*Godey’s* np). In fact, the reverend and the feminist were in agreement on the issue of fashion, but for different reasons. Rogers worried that fashionable women were not adequately developing their inner holiness, whereas Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the century’s pre-eminent American feminist, “judged the woman of fashion to be a major enemy of woman’s rights” (Banner 21). Cummins suggests that a woman should work on her self-command and attentiveness to others, and thus Gertrude’s sensible clothing style, lack of vanity, and apparent lack of concern about finding a marital partner place her above frivolous, fashion-obsessed females.

Patty Pace, on the surface, appears to be an inconsequential old spinster who is obsessed with fashion and with finding a mate, and her desire for male companionship echoes prevalent theories about female insanity. According to Martin, in medical writings that range from early Greece to the Romantic period, there was a “long-standing belief in sexual abstinence as a prime cause of woman’s disorder and derangement” (16). *The Lamplighter’s* narrator states that “Miss Patty labored under one great and absorbing regret . . . it was, that she was without a companion” (119). Comic as they are, Patty’s deportment and dress are deemed by her to be suitably feminine, and she acts purposely coquettish around males. Willie notes that, although Patty is old and infirm, she walks with “graces and airs,” she does old-fashioned curtsies, and she declares that she is “abstemious because it becomes a lady” (76). When Willie escorts her on an icy street, she “couldn’t have tossed her head or giggled more” (76); in short, Patty acts like a flirtatious young woman. She thinks of Willie as her gallant knight, and she later tells

Gertrude that matrimony has “always been her intention” (120). At the same time, Patty seems to relish her single status, and she suggests that her slow path to matrimony is by choice rather than by circumstance. She may “somewhat meditate matrimony,” but she clearly enjoys her independence (120).

Patty is, in fact, a model of female independence. As a youth, she learned the upholsterer’s trade which she practised for many years. Patty’s lunacy doesn’t extend to her competency as a worker, for she is considered to be “so acute in her judgement, that a report at one time prevailed that Miss Pace had eyes in the back of her head, and two pairs of ears” (119). She is also a very “prudent and conscientious” labourer (119), who, through the efforts of her labour, has been able to maintain her own home. Although peculiar in habits and modes of expression, Patty Pace is also a completely self-sufficient woman who apparently chooses to remain single.

Crazy Bet and Patty Pace are, in many respects, similar figures: they both dress outlandishly and have “comprehending powers,” and they both seem to exhibit symptoms of what nineteenth-century medics would term hysteria. In *Godey’s*, Dr. Charles P. Uhle writes that a hysterical woman is “capricious in character, whimsical in conduct, excitable, impatient, obstinate, and frivolous She possesses a most variable and imaginative disposition, which, in spite of all that can be done, keeps her in a continued whirl of excitement from morning until night” (qtd. in Green 141). Patty and Bet’s dissimilarities are superficial: Crazy Bet is happiest in the natural world, for example, whereas Patty Pace is thoroughly a city girl. Bet decorates herself with leaves, vines and other natural objects, while Patty wears a ribbon around her waist festooned with such fashion-related items as a

feather fan, a black lace cap, and a roll of fancy paper. Bet is obsessed with death, most prominently that of her lover, but Patty is much more interested in the living; she is “well received and politely treated” in the homes of kindly-disposed ladies and gentlemen” and “it would have been hard to find any one whose intercourse extended to a wider circle” (119). Bet feels acute sorrow if she “sees a lamb die, or hears a mournful note from a bird” (164); she is also known to follow funerals and yell “are ye heathens, that ye serve the dead thus?” (17). In contrast, Patty states that she has “an inquiring mind” and she loves “to see everything that is modern” (208). Perhaps with the conscious intention of becoming an amusing center of attention, Patty discourses on trivial topics such as beauty, fashion and men. In *A New England Tale*, Bet functions as one of Jane’s spiritual guides and protectors. In *The Lamplighter*, Miss Pace’s main influence on Gertrude’s life is financial: Patty convinces Mr. Clinton to give Willie Sullivan a job, and she leaves her money to the young man. In spite of their differences, both Patty and Bet have similar functions in the texts. The crazy women are deserving of the heroines’ compassion, presumably because they have not been completed by marriage, but they also provide the heroines with cautionary role models. Should Gertrude and Jane fail to master their sentiments, they will, by implication, become one of the ridiculously over-sentimentalized (or crazy) women.

Cummins and Sedgwick perpetuate the myth that sexually deprived spinsters are apt to lose their reason. According to the era’s medics, “woman’s madness, hysteria and abnormality are the result of the deprivation of male company” (Martin 16), and Bet and Patty essentially suffer because they have been deprived of a life with a companion. If the

portrayal of the lunatics is stereotypical, however, it is also somewhat subversive, as the two mad women have more freedom than conventional nineteenth-century women do. The necessity of a woman's controlling of her emotions is pivotal in domestic fiction: the heroine struggles to repress her desire for freedom and to overcome sensations of anger and frustration, and her self-command is linked to her spiritual quest. The self-reliant mad and bad characters, on the other hand, throw off the shackles of convention and freely express their passions and emotions. According to Harvey Green, "the symptoms of hysteria were often described as more intense versions of the emotions of everyday life" (143). Patty and Bet have intense emotions precisely because they are attempting to survive in a world that has no special place or function for them.

Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* contains an eccentric unmarried woman who differs from Bet and Patty. Mrs. Vawse is less excitable than the others, and her method of communicating is entirely conventional. However, the old Swiss woman is still considered a peculiar old widow. Ellen thinks that Mrs. Vawse "has queer taste"; indeed the old woman chooses to have a high, pointed roof on her cottage because "her eyes were tired with the low roofs of this country" (187). Ellen also notes that Mrs. Vawse's dress "was very odd" and "not American" (190). Most of all, Ellen is disturbed by the older woman's decision to live such an isolated existence so far from others, and even Alice notes that Mrs. Vawse is "left like a wreck upon this mountain top" (172). Nonetheless, Mrs. Vawse is exempt from the mirthful reactions that greet Patty Pace and Bet, for in spite of her eccentricities, she has a "beautifully placid" countenance, and commands a "respect no one could help feeling for her" (190).

Even as Reverend Rogers warns readers about “cheerless and forsaken” old age, Mrs. Vawse is “cheerful and happy, as a little girl” (195). She loves her seclusion, and her only regret is that she may never see her beloved Alps again. While Patty Pace is preoccupied with matrimony, and while Bet is in constant mourning, Mrs. Vawse is truly at peace. She has accepted the deaths of her beloved mistress, husband and children, and has learned that “in whatsoever state I am therewith to be content” (189). Mrs. Vawse is also self-reliant in spite of the fact that she has no money and only owns the goods in her house. According to Warner, “there is not a more independent woman breathing. She does all sorts of things to support herself” (194). Mrs. Vawse works at nursing her neighbours back to health, she sews, she spins wool into yarn, knits it into stockings and socks, and she picks hops. In short, she does any odd job that might help to support her and her granddaughter. Alice states that “every body likes to gain her good-will; she is known all over the country; and all the country are her friends” (194). Not only is she respected, but Mrs. Vawse is satisfied with her life on the mountain top. When Ellen asks why she lives so far from everyone, Mrs. Vawse replies that she lives in her secluded cabin because “I feel more free” (193).

Mrs. Vawse, and her granddaughter Nancy, have characteristics that move beyond the constraints of the ‘true womanhood’ stereotype. Jane Tompkins argues that Mrs. Vawse “is the most completely happy and fulfilled person in the novel because economically, socially, and emotionally she is the most independent” (*Sensational* 167). For Tompkins, the character of Mrs. Vawse is socially significant; she teaches Ellen and Alice that “piety and industry, both activities over which a woman has control, can set you

free" (168). Indeed, Alice comes to visit Mrs. Vawse "to get a lesson of quiet contentment" (188). However, Tompkins' argument falters in several respects. Mrs. Vawse is not a great parental model: she seems to have little love or affection for her granddaughter and Nancy's animosity towards her is telling. Ellen mentions that Nancy "must be a very bad girl . . . you can't think what stories told me about her grandmother" (194). Mrs. Vawse may be industrious, but her self-sufficiency is mixed with an implicit selfishness: because she cannot truly love her granddaughter, it is up to Ellen to reform Nancy. Although Nancy exhibits disrespect for Mrs. Vawse, however, she also possesses many of her grandmother's characteristics. Nancy is headstrong, independent, and ready to pitch in and do hard work, and she is scornful of Ellen's frailty and aversion to work: "ain't you as fine as a fiddle? I guess you never touch your fingers to a file nowadays" (485). Nancy may not like her grandmother, but she appears more likely to follow Mrs. Vawse's example than Ellen does.

Mrs. Vawse's actual sphere of influence in the novel is small. She does not tempt the novel's heroine, Ellen, to follow in her footsteps. Ellen was born in a higher-class household and was used, at an early age, to a life with servants. Aunt Fortune, who shares Mrs. Vawse's belief about hard work, attempts to teach Ellen domestic chores, despite Ellen's aversion to housework. In fact, Warner belabours the point and fills page after page with Ellen's complaints. In one passage Ellen learns to churn butter, but she "did not like this at all; it was a kind of work she had no love for" (141). Ellen's mother was a spender rather than a producer, and Ellen emulates her mother. Therefore, even if Mrs. Vawse represents "piety and industry," Ellen eventually rejects her model of female self-

sufficiency. Ellen's reward, at the end of the novel, is to become a wife in a middle-class household, where she is only expected to supervise the hired help.

Mrs. Vawse, Patty Pace and crazy Bet are all, in their own ways, living a life outside the typical woman's realm, and are thus considered eccentric by their social group. In *Ruth Hall*, Fanny Fern examines another woman who is forced to live outside the domestic sphere and who is labelled a lunatic, but who is more clearly a victim of a male patriarchy than the other three. When the Halls stay in a hotel, Ruth meets a kindred spirit in Mary Leon: they both abhor "female recreations" such as "party-going, prinking and coquetting" (56). Ruth's marital happiness contrasts sharply with her friend's obvious marital distress, even though Mrs. Leon appears to be the ideal woman. Mrs. Leon has, after all, married above her station and is financially well off, and other young ladies envy her "beauty," "jewels," and "the magnificence" of her wardrobe (57); but she is also deeply melancholy and physically frail, subject to "severe and prostrating attacks of nervous headache" (56). Ruth mothers her unhappy friend, tenderly singing Mrs. Leon to sleep, and brushing her "disheveled locks" (56). No amount of Ruth's tenderness, however, can relieve Mrs. Leon's depression.

Mrs. Leon's major mistake in life has been to marry not for love but for financial security; she notes that "the chain is none the less galling, because its links are golden" (57). She complains that she is objectified in her marriage: she and her expensive toys are simply "appendages to Mr. Leon's establishment" (57). Although she cannot rightly be considered a mad woman, despite her depression, Mrs. Leon is nevertheless deemed a

lunatic by her husband, who uses the diagnosis as the grounds to have her dispatched to an insane asylum and thereby rids himself of her encumbrance.

In the 1849 text entitled *On Man's Power over himself to prevent or control Insanity*, John Barlow states that women are educated to be obedient rather than independent: "the want of active occupation becomes a most dangerous enemy" to women (qtd. in Martin 36). Fern disavows the notion that women drive themselves insane, and she critiques the institution of asylums. As Ruth wanders through the corridors of the hospital she notices that "there was helpless age, whose only disease was too long a lease of life for greedy heirs. There, too, was the fragile wife, to whom *love* was breath—being!—forgotten by the world and him in whose service her bloom had withered" (138). Ruth also sees a screaming woman who is in distress because "her husband ran away from her and carried off her child with him" (140). Mary Leon is considered insane only because "her love had outlived his [her husband's] patience" (138). According to Fern, the insane hospital is really a dumping-off place for discarded and abandoned women.

By the time Ruth comes to visit her in the asylum, Mrs. Leon has already wasted away and died. Ruth meets a "tall, handsome man, between forty and fifty, with a very imposing air and address" who states that both he and Mr. Leon considered Mary "crazy";—the asylum's imposing superintendent dubs her insane because he supports the ideology of the repressive establishment and the husband wants her diagnosed as mad because he wants to be unencumbered before he sets off for the continent (149). Mary Leon's actual death is puzzling. She apparently dies of starvation: Ruth notices her "emaciated form . . . sunken eyes and hollow cheeks" (141), and the superintendent tells

Ruth that Mary “has refused food entirely, so that we were obliged to force it” (139).

Yet, in a note to Ruth, Mrs. Leon writes that she “cannot die here” and begs Ruth to come and rescue her (141). Fern never answers the question of why Mrs. Leon refuses food if she really wants to live. Although she writes to Ruth, “I am not crazy” (140), her self-imposed starvation is problematic and perhaps symptomatic of an underlying mental illness. Fern, however, makes the point that insanity is really in the eyes of the beholder. Mary Leon suffers under a patriarchal system that permits men to dispose of wives whom they no longer want.

Fern is much more radical than most of her contemporaries, and she inserts a ‘madwoman’ into her tale in order to question the truthfulness of the insane label pasted on so many women. Cummins, Sedgwick and Warner, on the other hand, are more cautious than Fern and are less likely to directly criticize social customs. One must remember that the domestic authors were operating in a culture that sought to silence women’s subversive thoughts. The negative portrayal of the independent, aggressive mother-surrogate, for example, is indicative of the apprehension with which nineteenth-century authors viewed assertive women. Like the evil mother-surrogate, the lunatic is self-sufficient, but she is also a depressing, somewhat pathetic and pitiable woman who serves as yet another object lesson for the heroine. Because the lunatic and evil women have not developed their inner holiness and self-possession, they are incapable of having sustained loving relationships with a husband. Only Mrs. Vawse, who is not truly mad, is an exception. Interestingly, both Wilson and Jacobs employ sentimental tropes, yet they do not include female lunatics in their narratives. Perhaps because marriage is not

portrayed as the glorious reward for their heroines, Jacobs and Wilson feel no need to include the cautionary figure of the mad single women. Furthermore, neither Linda nor Frado need the opportunity to demonstrate compassion and Christian goodness to an unfortunate lunatic: indeed, their circumstances are so dire that it is others who look upon them with pity.

Lunatics such as Patty Pace and Crazy Bet, and evil caregivers, such as Mrs. Wilson and Nan Grant, are paradoxically both failures and successes. They are failures in the sense that they do not find true happiness, but they are successes in a man's world where they are able to forge independent lives. Gilbert and Gubar note that "even the most conservative and decorous women writers obsessively create fiercely independent characters who seek to destroy all the patriarchal structures which both their authors and their authors' submissive heroines seem to accept as inevitable" (77-78). Cummins, Warner and Sedgwick manage to subtly express their own rebellious thoughts: the heroine is enclosed in the home and restrained by ideals about woman's holiness, whereas the bad and the mad are permitted to play out alternative roles. The wicked widows become powerful, financially-independent females who freely express their rage, and the crazy spinsters are emotionally unbridled, self-sufficient and mobile. The lunatics' eccentric wardrobe is also a subversive statement in a culture that insisted on conformity in all things. Patty Pace's obsession with fashion, for example, renders her rebellious, even if she is also considered ridiculous. After all, Patty is an old spinster operating in an era in which "by age thirty-five most women donned caps under which they tucked their hair as a mark of grandmother status, thus symbolically renouncing their sexuality" (Banner 220).

Patty Pace publicly refuses to renounce her sexuality. Crazy Bet also defies expectations about woman's place: she is no longer youthful, yet she dresses like a wood nymph and refuses to give up her spirited, child-like romps through the woods. The heroine is imprisoned by the strict definitions of woman's realm, but the evil woman and the female lunatic escape from such restrictions.

Chapter 3

The Competent Heroines

The nineteenth-century sentimental heroine is generally an orphan who is on a quest to control her passions, gain an understanding of Christian principles and adapt with equanimity to ever-changing and difficult surroundings. She tries to develop an inner holiness and to avoid such frivolous pursuits as novel reading and shopping for the latest fashions. She may make a temporary foray into a work environment, usually as a teacher, but she ultimately enters a superior, surrogate family structure. Her rewards for learning her lessons so well are marital happiness and financial security. The heroine's success is frequently offset against other models of femininity offered in the sentimental novel. In the texts of Sedgwick, Warner and Cummins, for example, the alternate or failed models of femininity are represented in the figures of the evil caregiver, who is strong, self-supporting, and aggressive, and the female eccentric or madwoman, who is original, mobile, and fiercely autonomous. It is, in other words, a pious self-mastery that is eventually rewarded and not a forceful self-sufficiency, for the young heroine, should she fail to learn the lessons of self-control, could well end up becoming the bitter and nasty widow or the harmless and nutty spinster.

Both the bad and the mad are unmarried older women, like many of the authors themselves. By associating subversive characteristics with monsters and lunatics, such conventional authors as Sedgwick, Cummins and Warner could explore their ambivalent feelings about women's roles without directly challenging the audience to re-evaluate its assumptions about traditional female roles. They also express their own confusion and

anxiety about their position as single women in a society that marginalized and ridiculed old maids. This is not to state that sentimental authors unequivocally endorsed marriage. In their texts, the heroines' mothers, for example, illustrate the pitfalls of marrying badly. Nonetheless, Sedgwick, Warner and Cummins stop short of explicitly endorsing the single life. Lee Chambers-Schiller notes that "however qualified these authors were in their view of marriage, and however much they acknowledged the possibility of fulfilment in singlehood, they ultimately esteemed marriage more highly" (17). Some female authors, however, refused to cater to pervasive prejudices about single women. Instead, they borrowed sentimental tropes and then politicised the genre by deliberately re-evaluating the single woman's life.

In the works of Fanny Fern, Harriet Jacobs and Harriet Wilson, the heroine's circumstances and lessons depart dramatically from the sentimental norm. Fern's heroine, for example, is a widowed single mother rather than a helpless orphan, and she is thrust into the midst of lower-class culture. Two authors place race at the forefront of their texts: Harriet Jacobs, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and Harriet Wilson, in *Our Nig, or Sketches in the Life of a Free Black*. According to Baym, there are race and class limits in the sentimental genre; lower class and non-white characters are physically strong and are "unlikely to ascend into a more genteel sphere" (*Woman's* xl). While the middle-class white heroine progresses, those of a lower class or a different race remain unchanged and unmalleable; furthermore, these deprived characters accept their unequal status within their community. Fern, Jacobs and Wilson, however, create deprived characters who struggle against society and become politicised because they recognise and refuse to

accept their inferior status. Linda, Frado and Ruth also differ from typical sentimental heroines because they do not end up as wives; instead, when their narratives end, they are all single mothers who are working industriously to support themselves and their children. Ruth's experience is quite different, however, from that of Linda and Frado. Ruth's whiteness renders her more likely to flourish than the slave woman or the black heroine who toils in the 'free' North.

In the first chapters of *Ruth Hall*, Ruth is a typical middle-class lady of the type found in sentimental fiction. After a rather difficult childhood, she meets and quickly marries the man of her dreams. A description of Ruth's traditional female role in the early part of the novel helps to illustrate the transformation that will occur later on. After a tense period of living with her in-laws, Ruth eventually finds domestic happiness in her own, cozy little home: "Peace brooded, like a dove, under the roof of Harry and Ruth" (26). Although Ruth is initially somewhat untutored in the domestic skills, she quickly learns her housewifely duties, and even her cruel mother-in-law is hard pressed to find any faults in Ruth's housekeeping. Ruth's maid assures Mrs. Hall that Ruth "makes a pie for Massa Harry, or cooks a steak jess' as easy as she pulls off a flower" (30). The narrator intervenes in the story to warn old Mrs. Hall that Ruth's home is spotless: "You may draw those prying fingers across the shelves till you are tired, and not a particle of dust will adhere to them" (33). Ruth's domestic talents even extend to decorating. She creates a beautiful parlour with very little expenditure; cheap muslin is draped artfully over the windows, flowers fill the room, and Ruth covers the sofa "with her own nimble fingers"

(32). Ruth is, indeed, a submissive, highly skilled housewife, and she does not let any intellectual pursuits clash with her domestic duties.

Unlike most sentimental fiction that ends at the altar, Fern's novel begins with Ruth's marriage and examines what happens subsequently. The typical nineteenth-century American girl "was conditioned to expect happiness in a marriage" (Welter, *Dimity* 13), but Fern suggests that married life may be less than ideal. Harry is ineffectual and does not stand up to his parents when he perceives their obvious callousness towards Ruth. Ruth must also struggle through the death of her eldest daughter, and her married life is marred by a series of tragedies that culminate in the death of Harry. Fern illustrates that marital security is flimsy; indeed, that terrible things can happen to deserving, sweet wives.

Why did Sara Willis Parton, who laboured under the pen name of Fanny Fern, create such a conventionally domestic woman? Ruth is clearly a decent, pure and submissive mother and housewife. Just as Naomi Wolfe believes that there is a current backlash against feminists, so too does David Reynolds contend that a similar reaction occurred in the last century: "The rebellious woman writer was forced to disguise her feminism, to express it indirectly by fusing it with Conventional appearances" (403). Accordingly, Fern begins with a female protagonist who is ultra-conventional not only to make Ruth's character acceptable to a mass audience, but also to make her transformation all the more powerful. She is the "true-woman" whose circumstances force her to undergo a metamorphosis in order to survive.

Poverty transforms Ruth from an icon of true womanhood to an independent woman. Although Ruth's parents and in-laws are well off, they refuse to give Ruth

adequate support after Harry's death. Her brother also ignores Ruth's plight, and their friends excuse him: "Hyacinth has just married a rich, fashionable wife, and of course he cannot lose caste by associating with Ruth now" (100). Friends and family even refuse to help Ruth find a job: both her cousin, and her accountant, Mr. Develin, do not recommend Ruth for a teaching position when they have the opportunity to offer her even this little bit of help. When Ruth decides to become a writer, she sends some pieces to her brother, but he rejects the work and tells his sister that she has "no talent" as a writer (146); he then suggests self-servingly that Ruth "seek some *unobtrusive* employment" (147) outside the literary or journalistic world in which their names might be connected.

Ruth was not raised with the notion that she must one day earn a living, thus the expectation that she must do so is shocking for the middle-class Ruth. According to Welter, "the true woman's place was unquestionably by her own fireside – as daughter, sister, but most of all as wife and mother" (*Dimity* 31). When Ruth leaves her father's home she is told by her new mother-in-law, "now you 're married, you have n't any father" (13). Then when Ruth loses her husband, her family and friends wish that "she would take herself off into the country" (121) and be out of sight and mind. Without a father, brother or husband, Ruth becomes nothing; the cult of true womanhood doesn't have any place for the widowed or abandoned, because, without a man, such women have no identity. Ruth, at first, surrenders to this state, bewildered. Like many women who have lived protected lives, she is initially "timid, doubtful, and clingingly dependent" (Welter, *Dimity* 29), as true women were expected to be. When she apprehends that her

class has abandoned her, she becomes angry, and her transformative descent into working-class culture begins.

As a lady of leisure who had nurses for her children and maids to help with the housework, the young Ruth cared only for making a happy home for her husband and children. When she is driven into poverty, she is forced to become an individualist and, for the first time, she must do hard physical labour. While *The Lamplighter's* Gertrude Flint might offer to cut strawberries or iron clothing, the inappropriateness of such labour is made clear; Mrs. Prime tells Gertrude "you shan't get so red in the face with ironing agin, Miss Gertrude" (245). Ruth is as unfit for a life of physical labour as Gertrude is, yet Ruth must enter fully into lower-class culture. She *becomes* the underpaid servant, living with the domestics and working next to them.

Much as Fern might describe a journey into the working class, she nevertheless stresses that Ruth is merely a visiting participant. Even in the depths of misery, Ruth exhibits the advantages of her privileged background and her fine education. When she first arrives in a working-class slum, Ruth observes "soiled table-cloths, sticky crockery, oily cookery, and bad grammar" (87). This world is clearly foreign to the refined Ruth, and one expects that no amount of living in that world would force her to use sticky crockery or bad grammar. Indeed, Ruth's refinement helps her in her eventual social reascension.

Although Ruth only visits working class culture, she develops first-hand experience of the humiliation and loss of dignity women in her position undergo. Significantly, Ruth develops empathy with her lower-class co-workers, and, unlike typical

sentimental heroines, she does not raise herself above her lower-class associates. In *The Lamplighter*, Gertrude Flint's mother is careful to protect her daughter "from the rude herd," and, after her mother's death, "something in Gertrude's nature kept her from joining their rough sports" (5). Ruth, however, befriends servants such as the Scottish nursery maid Biddy M'Pherson. When Ruth and Biddy live in the same rooming house, Biddy frequently bursts into Ruth's room "in her usual thunder-clap way" (114). Ruth's compassion even extends to fallen women, and she comes to understand why some women resort to selling their bodies. As Ruth looks out her window, she comprehends that a pretentious-looking house nearby is actually a bordello, and that the faces in the window are "never without the stain that the bitterest tear may fail to wash away" (112). She not only pities the prostitutes but, more importantly, understands how they could fall into that life: "She knew now how it could be, when every door of hope seemed shut, by those who make long prayers and wrap themselves in morality as with a garment" (112). Ruth's proximity to the poor and oppressed educates her and later provides her with rich, interesting material for her newspaper articles.

As Ruth struggles to make a living, Fern illustrates the paucity of suitable employment for women. Ruth resorts to "begging" for employment from Mr. Herbert, who cannot hire her (97). Later, as a washerwoman and as a seamstress, she is unable to support herself and her children, and has no choice but to leave her daughter, Katy, with her evil in-laws. Ruth gamely works as hard as Biddy M'Pherson, but almost breaks under the strain. She cleans clothing standing side by side with her cousin's servants, "till the blood started from her knuckles" (101), and after Ruth finishes doing a particularly

large load of washing, a maid notices that she is “pale about the mouth, and holding onto her side as if she would never move again” (101). Ruth’s fitness for the working-class lifestyle is questioned, as she has neither the stamina nor the strength of other female servants. Nevertheless, the physical labour toughens her up and permits her to endure the long hours that she must spend in what eventually becomes her chosen profession, writing.

Ruth undergoes an emotional, as well as physical, metamorphosis: her hardships have a liberating effect as she realizes that she need not doubt herself. With no one else to lean on, she discovers that she has adequate intelligence, talent, and physical and emotional resources to survive, learning to trust her instincts and questioning the hypocrisy of the conventional middle-class society that has rejected her. Her brother Hyacinth’s insulting refusal to publish her material doesn’t bow Ruth. Instead, she finds in herself a fierce determination to succeed: “I *can* do it, I *feel* it, I *will* do it” (147). Acknowledging that there will be a desperate struggle first, Ruth determines that “it shall be *done*” (147). Ironically, her creativity is actually *freed* by her family’s rejection, as she is liberated from considering their feelings when she writes her texts, and she can freely criticize the class that abandoned her.

According to Carol Pearson, “poverty is limiting to the hero because it restricts opportunity for adventure and experimentation” (87), but in Ruth’s case, poverty is her *gateway* to adventure and experimentation. Issues such as the undervaluing of women’s labour and the lack of political power that women possess ferment in Ruth’s mind because she has an intimate knowledge of these wrongs. When she attains fame as a writer, her fans let her know that her understanding of their condition has touched them. A woman

who is married to an alcoholic writes, pleading with Ruth to adopt her child: "In [your writing] I see sympathy for the poor, the sorrowing, and the dependent" (213). In conventional sentimental fiction, a pious woman reforms a recalcitrant male. Freed from female constraints of "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (Welter, *Dimity* 21), Ruth is able to educate many males. One grateful fan writes, "I am a better son, a better brother, a better husband, and a better father, than I was before I commenced reading your articles" (235).

If Ruth's experience is bitter, it also affords her a chance to develop herself fearlessly, and she is freed to speak her mind and vent her frustration and anger. The child who was shushed by her father, and the young married woman who was compelled to endure silently the humiliations served up by her in-laws, develops into a woman of strength and character who expresses her opinions dauntlessly. Rumours abound about Ruth: "some maintain her to be a man, because she had the courage to call things by their right names, and the independence to express herself boldly on subjects which to the timid and clique-serving, were tabooed" (170). These readers assume that Ruth is male because she has broken the sex-role stereotyping. Women of the era were expected to "work in silence, unseen" (Welter, *Dimity* 29); they were expected to display piety and love, and not have or express opinions about political and social issues. Conventional sentimental authors denigrate "manly" women; Mrs. Wilson, for example, is depicted as hard and unfeminine. But Ruth is celebrated for her outspokenness and self-sufficiency, partly because Fern insists that Ruth's femininity is not at all compromised by her poverty.

Since Ruth is no longer part of conventional society, she can dissect the social order with “sacrilegious fingers which had dared to touch the Ark” (170). The submissive wife and mother who left behind domesticity and marriage also develops into a savvy businesswoman. In her early dealings with Mr. Lescom, Ruth quickly asks for an increase in pay when she realizes that his subscription list is swelling. She doesn’t get the increase, but it is not because she is afraid to ask for it: “Ruth was a novice in business matters, but she had strong common sense” (168). Although the editors take advantage of Ruth, she is sharp and cunning and knows her day will come. When she overhears *The Pilgrim* editors discuss that they’ll keep Ruth’s pay low until competitors force her price up, Ruth reflects that “when the cards change hands, I’ll take care to return the compliment” (169).

When Ruth achieves celebrity, marriage offers pour in, but her attention is fixed on business. In one passage, she tosses aside a marriage proposal from a wealthy southerner and instead focuses on a letter from a publishing house, clearly illustrating her preference for financial independence over marital ‘security.’ Ruth’s wisest business decision occurs when she keeps the rights to her published collection of articles, insisting on royalties instead of a single payment, for her royalties eventually far exceed the lump sum she would have received initially for the rights to her book. The most telling symbol of Ruth’s self-sufficiency is the image that appears at the conclusion of *Ruth Hall*: her story ends with a picture of a bank stock certificate rather than with a marriage licence.

Fern may depart from traditional sentimental fiction with her description of a financially independent heroine, but she is still bound to the ideals of true womanhood; her novel exhibits a tension between a forced independence and domestic femininity.

Essentially Ruth Hall is as much a fantasy figure as *The Wide, Wide World's* Ellen Montgomery; they both personify the author's view of perfection. Ruth is beautiful, with her curls and "her eye bright, her smile winning, and her voice soft and melodious" (6), and she is also a faultless housewife. Even Ruth's brilliance in the working world is echoed in the more conventional works of Cummins and Sedgwick, who suggest that Gertrude and Ellen are highly capable teachers. Ruth is self-reliant, but she is ambivalent about her role as a working woman, thus when her daughter, Nettie, suggests that she wants to write books one day, Ruth's reply is curt: "God forbid . . . no happy women ever writes" (225).

Ruth's enjoys her success, but is bitter at having been forced to work for a living. The character of Ruth is therefore subtly layered. She is an independent, free-speaking feminist who longs to be a true woman, unencumbered by the demands of the workplace. Although Susan Belasco Smith states that "Ruth has no faults" (xl), I would suggest that Ruth exhibits certain less-than-perfect character traits. During Ruth's admittedly difficult period in the rooming house, for example, she neglects Mrs. Leon, and her eventual visit is too late for her poor friend, who dies clutching a letter begging Ruth to "come and take [her] away" (141). Ruth also allows her daughter to live in what she knows is a soul-destroying environment. Ruth sends Katy to the Halls "for a week or two" (150) and then doesn't retrieve her for over a year, even though Ruth's writing provides enough income to buy food, boots, and winter wood. Another example of Ruth's inferred imperfection occurs when she becomes famous. She laughs gaily with John Walters, reading fan mail for the amusement of tablemates, seemingly unbothered that those earnest letters are

fodder for derisive laughter. Ruth displays an ambition, pride and selfishness that are absent in more conventional sentimental heroines. Gertrude Flint, Ellen Montgomery, and Jane Elton learn Christian goodness and are nearly faultless. The only criticism that could be made of Ellen, for example, is that she becomes overly passive, yet her submissive relationship with her husband would have been entirely conventional and expected in the mid-nineteenth century.

Fanny Fern is bound to the ideals of true womanhood, yet she invests a true woman such as Ruth with financial know-how and self-sufficiency. In *Incidents of the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Our Nig*, the heroines, like Ruth, also aspire to true womanhood, but the ideal is withheld from them. Harryette Mullen suggests that Jacobs and Wilson “place the slave narrative and the sentimental genre in dialogue, and often in conflict, in order to suggest the ideological limits of ‘true womanhood’ or bourgeois femininity” (245). Frado and Linda Brent certainly challenge the conventions surrounding sentimental heroines. Like Ruth, they must fend for themselves and work at low-paying jobs in order to feed their families. The struggle to survive, however, is more arduous for the black heroine. Ruth Hall temporarily lives in the midst of working-class culture, but she always remains resolutely fit for the middle class, and her later return to prosperity is therefore unsurprising. She is, after all, educated and bred to a higher station than that of a washerwoman. Frado and Linda, however, never achieve middle-class status. In fact, they are not even equal to lower-class whites.

In the introduction to *Our Nig*, Henry Gates Jr. compares Wilson’s narrative to Baym’s overplot of nineteenth-century women’s fiction and adequately establishes that

most of the overplot's fifteen elements occur "almost exactly in *Our Nig*" (xliii). In fact, both *Incidents* and *Our Nig* begin with situations that resemble those of other sentimental novels. Linda and Frado are both beautiful and innocent young girls. Linda loses her mother and is sent to live with an unkind master, and Frado is abandoned on the doorstep of a white family's home. Immediately, in both these tales, the differences of black and white experience become evident. At her mother's funeral, Linda discovers that her body is actually a piece of property owned by whites. When Frado is six years old, after her mother abandons her, she is denigrated as a nigger and unwillingly becomes an indentured servant.

In *Our Nig*, the depiction of Frado's parents challenges the representations of parents in the standard domestic tale. Typical sentimental mothers suffer over the loss of their children and some go to extreme lengths to save their children from a life of hardship. Frado's white mother, far from being like the angelic mothers found in other sentimental tales, is a cruel, bitter woman who calls her child a "black devil" and purposely leaves her with the devilish Mrs. Bellmont (16). The mothers of Ellen Montgomery or Jane Elton teach their daughters about God, but Mag Smith enters "the darkness of perpetual infamy" and berates her daughter for being "a wild, frolicky thing" (16, 18). Even Mag's marriage inverts that of most parents in woman's fiction: instead of marrying a neglectful spendthrift, Mag chooses someone who can provide her with an improved standard of living. Mag marries a black man as an alternative to begging for a living, and Jim chooses "his treasure—a white wife" (14).

In the Bellmont home, Frado suffers under a taskmaster who is much crueler than Miss Fortune or Mrs. Wilson. As Frado works, her toil is spiced with “words that burn’ and frequent blows on her head” (30). Other female protagonists watch in horror as their pets are tortured; Gertrude Flint’s cat is flung into boiling water and Ellen Montgomery’s horse is whipped. Frado, on the other hand, experiences the brutalization of her own body, denied even tears: she is whipped because Mrs. Bellmont decides that tears are “a symptom of discontent and complaining which must be ‘nipped in the bud’”(30). Wilson describes scene after scene in which Frado’s mouth is stuffed with a block of wood, and she is then beaten until “her face [is] swollen and full of pain” (36). Frado’s tormentor is not a symbol of unhappy spinsterhood. Rather, Mrs. Bellmont’s cruelty underscores the despicable treatment that even free blacks received, although Wilson is careful not to alienate abolitionists: in her preface, she insists that her mistress is “wholly imbued with southern principles” (3).

In conventional sentimental fiction, the heroine is rescued and tenderly mothered by a concerned godmother figure who teaches the heroine about self-mastery and prepares her for her eventual marriage; however, Frado’s godmother figure, Aunt Abby, is an inadequate protector. Abby is reluctant to intercede on Frado’s behalf because it “would only bring reserved wrath [from Mrs. Bellmont] on [Abby’s] defenceless head” (45). Abby ministers to Frado, yet her main preoccupation is to teach Frado how to endure abuse; she advises Frado to do “good to those that hate us” (80). Abby’s usefulness is suspect: she doesn’t prepare Frado for a life after servitude, and when Frado is finally

freed, she marries the first man who shows an interest in her. Ostensibly Frado need not prepare for marriage; freedom, not marriage, is her ultimate reward.

Gates states that “all men in *Our Nig* befriend the heroine, except for one; all the principal women in this novel victimise the heroine, except for one” (xlv). However, Wilson’s depictions of the two genders are not so evenly split. There are women, other than Abby, who come to Frado’s aid: a teacher tells Frado’s classmates that “I think I shall love her [Frado], so lay aside all prejudice and vie with each other in shewing kindness and good-will to one who seems different from you” (32). Jane Bellmont also supports Frado. Gates correctly assesses that the men are generally depicted more sympathetically than the women; however, the men who do befriend Frado are ineffectual protectors. Mr. Bellmont seldom takes a position in the controversies at home, and when Frado is beaten, he generally chooses to go out for a walk. Jack, ostensibly Frado’s friend and protector, gives her the questionable nickname ‘Nig’, and he seems to make light of Frado’s situation. When he returns home after a long period, he looks at Frado’s bruised body and says, “same old story, is it; knocks and bumps? Better times coming; never fear, Nig” (70).

Even Frado’s fiercest protector, James, simply tells Frado to sleep after a beating: “You will feel better in the morning” (51). When he realizes how beaten Frado is, James passes a few days worrying but then feels “in a mood to visit and entertain old associates and friends” (51). Later, when James is ill, Frado’s “health [is] impaired by lifting the sick man, and by drudgery in the kitchen She [is] at last so much reduced as to be unable to stand erect for any great length of time” (81-82). Surprisingly, James doesn’t notice

that the young girl who lifts and turns him every day is getting weaker. Finally, when Frado asks James why a loving God made her black, James avoids the question and simply counsels Frado to “be a good girl” (50). James’s advice is similar to that of *The Wide, Wide World*’s Alice Humphreys or *The Lamplighter*’s Emily Graham; the typical sentimental heroine is exhorted to be good and to forgive her tormentor. However, for Frado such advice is particularly ineffective. Frado points out that even if she is ‘good’ she shall be whipped.

Frado, like Gertrude, comes into the world without religious knowledge, but Frado’s story is distinctly *not* a pilgrim’s progress. Abby and James introduce her to Christian scripture, but Frado has a confusing and complex relationship to religion. Although the Christian minister assures her that God is for everyone, Frado is tempted to believe that God has deserted her. Furthermore, Mrs. Bellmont regularly reminds Frado that “prayer was for whites, not for blacks” (94). James and Aunt Abby continue to encourage Frado’s spiritual curiosity, but she is ultimately only interested in heaven if she can be near James: “*He* [James] was the attraction. Should she want to go there if she could not see him?” (100). Thus Frado’s Christian feelings are linked to a beloved man and not to a nebulous God. Later, she reflects that, if Mrs. Bellmont, a professor of religion, is allowed into heaven, “then she [Frado] did not wish to go” (104). Frado eventually develops some inner strength, but it is not developed because of a deep faith in a higher power.

Frado’s most significant act of independence occurs because she cannot physically tolerate more beatings. When Mrs. Bellmont plans to beat Frado for dropping a stick of

wood, Frado suddenly raises her voice in anger: “‘Stop!’ shouted Frado, ‘strike me, and I’ll never work a mite more for you’” (105). She hits upon the sure method of controlling her abuser—through reference to her economic value; her work is worth the paid labour of at least two people. However, even after her act of what Mullen terms “sass,” Frado wavers back and forth from a position of strength to weakness (254). After forbidding Mrs. Bellmont to strike her, for example, Frado becomes curiously apathetic and her resistance seemingly evaporates: “Thus passed a year. The usual amount of scolding, but fewer whippings” (106). Frado’s self-confidence seems, in other words, short lived, because she allows the beatings to continue.

Although Frado longs for freedom, she is reluctant, and perhaps fearful, to leave the home of her oppressor. Mrs. Bellmont is aware that Frado can leave. In a discussion with her husband, Mrs. Bellmont mentions that, if Frado were to be permitted to go to church and to be in the parlour like her own girls, “it would not be six months before she would be leaving me” (89-90). Frado herself contemplates leaving: “But had she not better run away? Where? She had never been from the place far enough to decide what course to take” (108). Evidently she understands that she *can* run away. However, she decides to consult Aunt Abby, and Frado allows this ‘protector’ to influence her: Aunt Abby “mapped the dangers of her course, her liability to fail in finding so good friends as John and herself” (108). Of course, Abby doesn’t offer to help Frado find better living arrangements. Frado then passes many days and nights wondering what to do, and she even contemplates poisoning her tormentor. In a curious act of submission, she chooses

to “stay contentedly through her period of service” (109). Of course, it is implausible that Frado could ever be content in the Belmont house.

Although Frado speaks up, recognises her economic value to her mistress, and decides to “assert her rights when they were trampled on,” she nevertheless retreats from the open door and the possibility of freedom (108). In a real sense, Frado’s tormentor *wins*: Frado is so overworked and beaten that her body physically breaks down, and even when she is able to leave the house, she is too feeble to support herself. She must then face the ignominy of knowing that her friends have begged Mrs. Belmont to give her refuge. Mrs. Belmont’s last words about Frado are: “she shall never come under this roof again; never! never!” (121). In a few lines on the final page, Wilson tags on the typical punishment for sentimental villains: Mrs. Belmont’s children desert her and she passes away “after an agony in death unspeakable” (130). Frado is not present, however, and does not witness her torturer’s death. There is no victory and no reward for the black heroine and the villain has the last cruel word. On the other hand, by writing down her story, Frado (Harriet Wilson) manages to wrestle a sort of victory from the situation. If Mrs. Belmont tries to silence Frado with blocks of wood and threats to cut out her tongue, Frado finally speaks with her pen.

Fanny Fern and Harriet Wilson both inject their personal experiences into their tales, and their bitterness towards others is evident. According to Christian philosophy one must turn the other cheek; so the sentimental heroine learns to bow her head, accept abuse, and hope that the bad will feel guilty if their cruelty is met with passive acceptance. In *The Lamplighter*, for example, after Mrs. Ellis maliciously smashes Gertrude Flint’s

prized relics, Gertrude wrestles tearfully with herself and eventually determines that her best course of action is to take no action: "She had conquered; she had achieved the greatest of earth's victories, a victory over herself" (118). Gertrude gives no sign of anger, and "Mrs. Ellis experience[s] a stinging consciousness of the fact that Gertrude had shown a superiority to herself in point of forbearance" (118). Thus when Gertrude governs herself, she disarms her opponent. Gertrude even learns to forgive her most cruel tormentor, Nan Grant. As Nan lies dying, her conscience agitated, Gertrude gently cares for her. However, Ruth Hall clearly does not forgive her father or Hyacinth, and Frado does not suppress her anger or excuse her tormentor at the end of *Our Nig*. The narrator considers the family who has used and forsaken Frado: "Frado has passed from their memories, as Joseph from the butler's, but she will never cease to track them till beyond mortal vision" (131). The curious ending suggests that Frado waits to be asked for forgiveness by a family who has forgotten her. It is also clear that Frado will not forgive and forget the Bellmonts.

Both Frado and Ruth exact revenge on those who hurt them by writing about their tormentors. Only Ruth becomes successful, however, and is able to luxuriate in that revenge. If Frado is not as aggressive and ambitious as Ruth Hall, it is because she does not have the same opportunities that Ruth has. Ruth's trials in a lower-class culture are always tinged by Ruth's underlying awareness that she deserves much better, and Fanny Fern invests her autobiographical narrative with a self-confident tone. Frado, however, is consistently taught that she is inferior. Throughout *Our Nig*, the narrator's tone is defeatist, and for every advance there is a corresponding setback. Even when Frado

leaves the Bellmonts, learns a trade, and becomes self-sufficient, she sabotages herself by making a hasty marriage to an unworthy man and by giving up her independence. She wants the female dream, security with a husband within the domestic sphere, so she opens her heart to love, “that arbitrary and inexorable tyrant” (127). That dream proves illusory, however, as Frado’s husband abandons her after the birth of their child. Frado then leaves her child in another woman’s care and works “in preparing her merchandise” (130). This business is only somewhat successful: Frado travels throughout the vicinity “to encounter *many* frowns, but *some* kind friends and purchasers” (130, italics mine). While Ruth is cocky and proud of her independent status and her financial success, Frado exhibits no such pride in her accomplishments. She survives, but she cannot keep her child with her, and she is still an invalid. In the end, Frado begs the reader for help: “enough has been unrolled to demand your [the reader’s] sympathy and aid” (130).

Frado’s tale is not the success story Ruth’s is; nevertheless, Frado does overcome extreme difficulties. Heroines such as Ellen Montgomery and Jane Elton are born secure in the knowledge that they are loved. Frado, however, is not loved or valued even by her own mother. James overhears Frado’s sobs: “No mother, father, brother or sister to care for me, and then it is, You lazy nigger, lazy nigger—all because I am black! Oh, if I could die!” (75). She must endure years of physical and mental torture, and the fact that she survives is itself a triumph. Frado even maintains her “exuberance of spirit” (17) when she is in the Bellmont home, and she manages to entertain others by doing such things as blowing smoke in the teacher’s drawer and dancing on the barn roof.

Although Frado doesn't actively fight for her freedom, she does express her rebellion in acts of subtle subterfuge. When Mrs. Belmont orders Frado to eat off her dirty plate, for example, Frado gets her dog to lick the plate clean before she will use it. Frado becomes increasingly independent when she asserts her right to live without beatings. She also decides to enrich her mind: "Her school-books were her constant companions, and every leisure moment was applied to them" (115-16). Ruth initially wonders if she can support herself, and Frado shares this concern; she wonders "if she *could* succeed in providing for her own wants. Her health was delicate, yet she resolved to try" (116). Frado's tale is not about financial success; it is about survival and the attainment of independence and freedom in a racist and patriarchal culture.

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Linda Brent struggles for most of her lifetime to be considered as 'free' as Frado. However, perhaps because Linda is valued by her parents in her early years, and also because she has the constant support and encouragement of her grandmother, Linda has a greater sense of self-worth than Frado does. Linda is so well cared for that she doesn't even realize that she is a slave until her mother dies. Even then, Linda is extremely well treated by her kind mistress: "no toils or disagreeable duties were imposed upon me. My mistress was so kind to me that I was always glad to do her bidding" (5). She is protected from the brutal sides of slavery until the age of twelve, when her mistress dies. Linda is then bequeathed to the Flint family, and she is confronted with harsh masters. Mrs. Flint is "deficient in energy . . . but her nerves were so strong, that she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash" (10). Dr. Flint is cruel and sadistic.

Soon after Linda's arrival, for example, she watches as he orders the family cook to eat mush that has been regurgitated by a dying dog.

During her time with the Flints, Linda begins to wish for freedom. Her father, unlike her grandmother, bitterly opposes the institution of slavery, and Linda supports her father's position. She and her brother William have "the same aversion to the word master" (15) and the family has "daily controversies" upon the subject of slavery (9). Because Mr. Brent taught his children that "they were human beings" rather than objects, Linda feels increasingly angry and resentful towards the system of slavery. Rather than suppress her anger like other sentimental heroines, Linda revels in it, so when Dr. Flint tells the child that she "was made for his use . . . never before had [her] puny arm felt half so strong" (16).

When provoked by Dr. Flint, Linda doesn't resort to subtle subterfuge to make her point. She stares into Dr. Flint's face and answers him as if she were his social equal. Linda tells Dr. Flint about her love for a free black man, for example, and she says, "Don't you suppose, sir, that a slave can have some preference about marrying?" (38). He strikes Linda for the first time, and when she recovers, she notes that "fear did not enable me to control my anger" (38). Linda shouts, "You have struck me for answering you honestly. How I despise you!" (38). Dr. Flint is shocked at her insubordination, and asks her if she is aware of what she has just said. Linda coolly responds that "your treatment drove me to it" (39). She is fully cognisant that she is legally Dr. Flint's property, but she reasons that such ownership laws are immoral and against God's will. Consequently, when Dr. Flint states that he "can kill" Linda, she courageously and defiantly replies, "you have no

right to do as you like with me” (39). While Ellen Montgomery and Jane Elton learn to conquer their own passions, Linda and Frado must learn to conquer their tormentors. Jacobs states that “when the ruthless hand of man strikes the blow, regardless of the misery he causes, it is hard to be submissive” (36); thus Linda’s potent response to cruelty is to raise her voice and take action.

Unlike Frado, Linda does not continually receive blows from her master, but she is at risk of sexual assault. She describes the “all-pervading corruption produced by slavery” and notes that when the slave girl is fourteen or fifteen, the slave owner begins “to bribe her with presents” (51). If the presents don’t work, she may be “whipped or starved into submission” (52). Although the narrator of *Incidents* states that “resistance is hopeless” (52), Jacobs’s heroine belies those words. When Linda’s good looks catch the eye of her lustful master, her most desperate and rebellious act occurs, and she shrewdly resists her master by choosing to let a free man seduce her. She paradoxically loses her ‘purity’ to protect herself from rape.

By allowing a white man to impregnate her, Linda foils Dr. Flint’s plan; her womb has already been taken. This was a highly audacious act because, in the nineteenth century, young girls were told that their virginity was their “pearl of great price” (Welter, *Dimity* 5). By losing her ‘greatest treasure,’ Linda hopes to become a less desirable sexual object for Flint. Although her act empowers her, Linda also realizes that, when she sexually devalues herself in Flint’s eyes, she lowers herself in everyone else’s estimation as well. Her out-of-wedlock pregnancy further lowers her status; pre-marital chastity was

highly valued and unwed mothers were considered morally reprehensible. According to Welter, a woman without purity was “no woman at all, but a member of some lower order To be guilty of such a crime, in the women’s magazines at least, brought madness or death” (*Dimity* 23). Clearly Linda’s decision to lie with Mr. Sands protects her from Dr. Flint, yet it creates a host of new problems for the heroine: she compounds her ‘inferior’ status as a slave by becoming a fallen woman.

Linda recognises that her readers may judge her harshly for her actions, thus she carefully explains her motives and repeatedly appeals to the reader for understanding. Jacobs takes available sentimental paradigms and deliberately chooses to mimic Stowe’s literary discourse. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe implores the readers to act against slavery: “And you, mothers of America. . . I beseech you, pity the mother who has all your affections, and not one legal right to protect, guide, or educate, the child of her bosom” (441). Jacobs hesitantly and then more forcefully defends the heroine’s decision to have children out of wedlock by making a heartfelt appeal to her female reader, and at the same time she highlights the racialized nature of gender constructions; her white, female reader has never had her virtues tested: “Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! you never knew what it is to be a slave. . . You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hated tyrant” (56). Jacobs reminds her reader that the white orphan’s mind is innocent and pure, but the black orphan’s mind is “peopled with unclean images” (26), and even though Linda “did wrong,” Jacobs suggests that “the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others” (56).

Frances Foster states: "Although the social and economic realities of black life did not allow strict adherence to the Cult of True Womanhood, black women, at least publicly, aspired to this standard" ("Adding" 34). Linda is no exception: she states that she "had resolved to be virtuous, though [she] was but a slave" (57), and, although she can defend her decision to have children with Mr. Sands, her decision still fills her with "sorrow and shame" (54). Stephen Matteson points out that Jacobs takes the Seneca Falls declaration a step further:

The [Seneca Falls] declaration had identified the existence of a double standard between men and women, professing that man 'has created a false public sentiment by giving the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquencies which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated, but deemed of little account in man.' Jacobs pointedly uses this double standard to apply to the different expectations of white women and women of color, contending that the virtues represent valid aspirations for black women too (Matterson 86).

In Jacobs's narrative, the slave is denied the right to be pure, to have a legal husband, and to own and raise her own children. As Jean Fagan Yellin states, "the roles that define womanhood in America—the innocent girl, the devoted wife, the nurturing mother—are first denied to women held in slavery, then used to condemn slave women who do not play them" ("Through" 54). Linda questions this condemnation, and audaciously discusses her sexual choices. She clarifies that she *chose* to lie with Mr. Sands and was not compelled to do so: "I did it with deliberate calculation" (54). The

reader is surprised to learn, long after Linda has moved in with her grandmother, that the heroine is again pregnant with Mr. Sands' child. She often reiterates that the system of slavery has forced her to make such a degrading decision, so her choice to have two children with a white man is intriguing. What her decision represents is that, while most sentimental protagonists are child-like female angels, Linda is human with basic human desires. She chooses to continue sleeping with Mr. Sands long after it is really necessary because, "to be an object of interest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master, is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave" (55). Furthermore, sleeping with a white man is an empowering act for Linda; even though she is enslaved, she makes a *free* choice about who can inhabit her body. She has the added incentive of getting revenge on Dr. Flint, for she knows that "nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that [she] favored another; and it was something to triumph over [her] tyrant even in that small way" (55-56). Linda's attitude of defiant rebellion is surprising given her lack of power. After all, her adversary is older, male, rich, and her owner, yet she competes with him as an equal and feels 'triumphant' when she rejects him for a younger, unmarried, more desirable white man. She notes that "My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each" (87).

Linda empowers herself, but it is not with Christian teachings. During her period with the Flints, when she lives under the constant threat of rape, she is unable to find comfort in Christianity and is exceedingly cynical about a religion that silently condones slavery. Organized Christian religion is depicted as ineffective relief for the black orphan, and because Linda and Frado cannot find strength and comfort in religion, they are denied

the usual sentimental method of coping with helplessness and rage. Linda's family does teach her Christian scripture; her grandmother earnestly strives to make Linda and her brother feel that slavery is "the will of God" (15). However, Linda rejects her grandmother's view and calls Christianity "a beautiful faith . . . but I, and Benjamin, her youngest boy, condemned it" (15). What Linda and Ben specifically condemn is not Christianity itself, but the Christian teachings which suggest that one's brutalized position is God's will. Linda's cynicism about organized religion endures throughout her narrative; during a visit to England, Linda contrasts the genuineness of an English clergyman's Christian professions with the "contemptuous manner in which communion had been administered to coloured people, in my native place" (189-90). Later, after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, Linda hides in New York and thinks of the church with disdain: "I heard the bells ringing for afternoon service, and, with contemptuous sarcasm, I said, 'Will the preachers take for their text, 'Proclaim liberty to the captive'" (204). Furthermore, like Frado and Ruth, Linda does not practise Christian forgiveness. When Linda's grandmother sends news of Dr. Flint's death, she says, "I hope he made his peace with God" (201). Linda, however, decides that her grandmother "was a better Christian than I was, if she could entirely forgive him," and Linda refuses to pardon Flint, claiming that the man was, and will remain "odious" to her (201). As Katherine Fishburn suggests, *Our Nig* and *Incidents* do not focus on the black heroine's failure to become Christian, but on the white Christian's failure to fully accept and embrace the black heroine (112).

Linda's situation is both morally and legally much more dire than Frado's, but Linda's spirited defence of herself and her pursuit of a better life make her a much more

proactive (and less reactive) heroine than Frado. Tompkins notes that in the world of sentimental fiction, you cannot run away and “you cannot protest the conditions under which you are forced to remain” (*Sensational* 176). However, Jacobs suggests that if conditions are bad enough, you can, indeed, protest your living conditions and run away. Linda determines that she will change what she *can* change, and her resolution to escape becomes her driving quest. Linda has the advantage of being surrounded by friends and family who are willing to accept her. Frado’s ‘protectors’ are ineffective and she is basically told to put up with the abuse until she is old enough to leave the Bellmonts. Linda’s friends and grandmother, on the other hand, risk their own lives to hide her and ferry her to safety in New York.

In a clear reference to the sentimental genre that she interrogates, Jacobs writes, “Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage” (207). An acquaintance tells Linda that he has seen her bill of sale, and the news strikes her “like a blow” (206). She is both strong-willed and proud, and the idea that she can be paid for pains her. She states that she is “deeply grateful to the generous friend who procured it,” but Linda despises “the miscreant who demanded payment for what never rightfully belonged to him or his” (206). For Linda, freedom is a right and not a privilege, and it does not bring her happiness because she should never have been forced to fight for her freedom in the first place. She really wants to be completely self-sufficient, and states, “the dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own” (207). Jacobs daringly suggests that an impure black girl is just as deserving of

respect, happiness and financial recompense as the white angels of other sentimental tales are.

Fern, Jacobs and Wilson effectively point out that female independence is hindered by political and social attitudes towards single women. In most domestic fiction, women need protection. As Baym points out, the sentimental heroine is, after all, young and female, “a composite implying that her self-dependence is only possible within the boundaries of a peaceful protectorate” (*Woman's* xxv). What Fern, Jacobs and Wilson explore is a world in which no such protectorate exists for women, and when a woman is denied a secure home, her circumstances are much more dire than those of men. First of all, men can live in relative security from physical danger. Frado and Linda, although never assaulted or raped, are clearly vulnerable to such threats, and even Ruth is at risk. When Ruth arrives in the rooming house, two low-browed fellows discuss her, and one comments: “I should n't mind kissing her” (87). In addition to being vulnerable to sexual violence, Ruth, Frado and Linda have to work and still take care of their children. In *Ruth Hall*, for example, when the possibility of a job as a seamstress is held out to Ruth, she is forced to refuse: “She could not bring her two children there, and she had no one to leave them with” (97). Ruth, Frado and Linda are also confronted by the scarcity of well-paying jobs open to women. Frado determines to make a living by creating straw bonnets, but she asks, “how should *she*, black, feeble and poor, find any one to teach her” (124). After labouring day and night for two weeks, Ruth is stunned to discover that her work is worth “only fifty-cents for all this ruffling and hemming” (119). Even the profession of writing has additional hardships for women. When Ruth determines to make her living by writing,

she endures what few male authors ever undergo; she is forced to write when she is tired, after the children are asleep, at the end of a long day: "It was a pity that good oil was so dear, too, because most of her writing must be done at night, when little Nettie's prattling voice was hushed" (160).

The subversive authors infuse their heroines with strength and determination. They also expose the myth of domesticity. *Ruth Hall's* subtitle, "A Domestic Tale of the Present Time," is ironic, for the novel is actually a "critique of the domestic scene" (Warren "Domesticity" 6), and is more of a survival guide for those thrust out of the idealized middle-class home. Wilson demystifies the 'saintly mother' and, as Fishburn points out, calls "attention to the cruelty that mothers can wreak on their children, the tyranny wives can wield over their husbands, and the dependence of middle-class women on the household labors of working-class women" (95). Jacobs suggests that true domestic happiness occurs when a *woman* is economically independent and has a home of her own. All three writers also point out that marriage is an insubstantial goal. Things can and do go wrong. After all, Ruth's prince dies, Frado's prince abandons her and her child, and Linda's white prince turns out to be a fraud; Mr. Sands actually condones slavery and treats their daughter like a maidservant. Although the cult of domesticity taught women that they would find self-fulfilment through self-abnegation, the radical authors' experiences showed women that "self-actualization required the exercise of their talents" (Chambers-Schiller 339).

Since traditional 'domestic harmony' is so elusive, Fanny Fern argues that economic independence for women is both desirable and feasible. Both Jacobs and

Wilson, however, point out that such independence is an exceeding improbable goal for the black heroine. The white orphan has a skin colour that assures her of the *possibility* of success, but the black orphan is hindered at every step. For example, if she is beaten badly enough, her health can be permanently damaged. If her choices for marital partners are severely limited, she may choose an unworthy suitor. If she is repeatedly told, "Religion was not meant for niggers," she will not find solace in scripture (*Our Nig* 68). If her education is too meagre, she may have to rely on public charity for support.

In life, as in literature, the white authors fared much better than their black counterparts. Although *Ruth Hall* was blasted in the press for its "filial disrespect and religious irreverence," (Reynolds 404), the novel "sold 70,000 copies in the first year of publication" (Belasco Smith xxxiv). Self-published *Incidents* sold many fewer. According to Claudia Tate, the book "fell into disrepute for more than one-hundred years" (26). *Our Nig* fared even worse: "That book's appeal for patronage failed and immediately after publication it languished, becoming obscure for more than a century" (Tate 26). Karla Holloway points out that the market was essentially unavailable to the black author: "As long as her white audience is still an 'overseer,' the space she wants to diminish between them . . . will not be bridged" (137). Consequently Jacobs and Wilson did not become financially successful writers.

Although not every writer featured in this thesis was equally successful, the six sentimental authors share common ground. In addition to using sentimental tropes, each author exhibits an interest in the plight of single women and in female independence. Sedgwick, Cummins, and Warner give their heroines the capacity to exercise their talents,

and they give their villains and madwomen the freedom to do so. *The Wide, Wide World's* Aunt Fortune, for example, is commendable for her hard work and her autonomy even though she is disparaged for her unfeminine aggression. Even Mrs. Wilson and Nan Grant are admirable for their ability to survive as older single women in a culture that did not value women's labour. Certainly, as I have suggested, these widows are more capable survivors than the sickly, overly passive mothers of Jane Elton and Ellen Montgomery.

The mad characters in the conventional novels are also intriguing examples of spinsterhood. A character such as *The Lamplighter's* Patty Pace is ridiculed for her eccentricity, but she is also praiseworthy for her ability to survive on her own and to do so on her own terms. Bet is wild and unpredictable, but she is a freely mobile explorer of the "sanctuary of nature" (85); and Mrs. Vawse is a model of self-sufficiency and quiet contentment. Cummins, Warner and Sedgwick, although hesitant to condone the actions of their lunatics and wicked widows, nonetheless present such women as physically fit, intelligent and ardently independent.

Fern, Jacobs and Wilson essentially take the promise of independence a step further than their more conventional counterparts. While the conventional authors make their marginal villains and lunatics autonomous, their heroines are not expected to participate in any marketplace other than the marriage market. In *The Lamplighter*, Emily Graham says to her father, "I thought the object, in giving Gertrude a good education, was to make her independent of all the world, and not simply dependent upon us" (140). Of course, Gertrude's independence is eventually constrained by her sense of duty, and after her brief teaching spell, she never has to support herself again. For Frado, Ruth and

Linda, and for their respective authors, the work-experience is prolonged indefinitely. The three writers explore scenarios in which women can, and do, become self-reliant, and even if the black heroines do not succeed as splendidly as Ruth Hall, they are nonetheless able to support themselves.

While traditional models of sentimental literature may be considered escapist, some authors were able to employ sentimental tropes and politicize the genre. Fern interrogates women and employment, insisting that women need access to the male-dominated workplace. Jacobs suggests that a woman of colour has the right to aspire to virtuous womanhood, and she also has the right to own a home of her own. Wilson politicizes her text by suggesting that racism runs more deeply than the political construct of slavery. Although in her preface she purposely omits “what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home,” (3) she nonetheless illustrates that a free Northern black woman can suffer indignities equal to or surpassing those of her Southern counterparts.

Single women’s autonomy is clearly a preoccupation in midnineteenth-century sentimental fiction. While these texts may appear to be intellectually uncritical, in fact, they interrogate women’s roles. Writers as varied as Harriet Jacobs and Susan Warner are united in their desire to portray expressive, self-reliant unmarried female characters, be they lunatic, widowed, black or white.

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