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Deformed bodies: Figures of deviance in fiction by American women, 1860–1910

Dunne, Linda Ellen, Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1994

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**DEFORMED BODIES:
FIGURES OF DEVIANCE IN FICTION BY AMERICAN WOMEN,
1860-1910**

by

LINDA DUNNE

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York

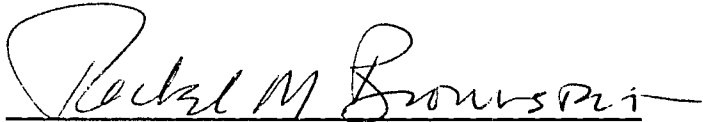
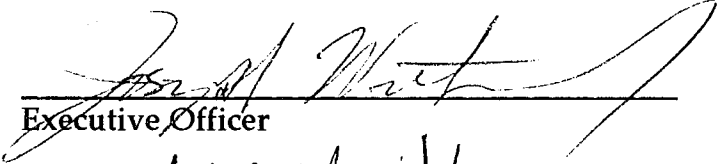
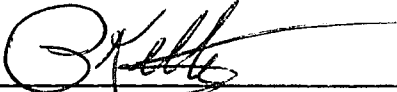
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

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Introduction: Bound to the Procrustean Bed

In this study, I examine the deformed body as a figure used in narrative fiction by women to depict various forms of social and cultural deviance. My focus is on selected works by five American women--Harriet Prescott Spofford, Rebecca Harding Davis, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman--who wrote during the fifty-year period from 1860 to 1910, roughly the beginning of the Civil War to just before World War One. It was been undertaken with a number of purposes in mind. There is, first of all, the ongoing feminist project of recovering neglected and underrated women writers and their texts. Although this has not been my primary aim, any study of women writers serves this end, so long as the writers remain neglected and underrated. Another purpose which inevitably emerges in a study of this nature is that of increasing our understanding of a crucial period of American literary history. The events that took place roughly a hundred years ago have shaped our own. The literary texts that were produced during that time have influenced what we write today. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a time when modern definitions of gender, sexuality, education, family, racial identity, work, and even popular entertainment were being formulated. To better understand women's texts written during that period is to better understand our own lives. A third purpose has been to learn more about a group of women writers whose lives challenged convention through their personal and professional choices. The women writers studied here were among the first generation in America to aspire to be creative artists. They were also the first who were faced with increasingly rigid definitions of sexuality that impacted upon their emotional and sexual relationships. Their struggles shed light upon our own. My primary aim in this study, however, is to understand how the figure of bodily deformity functions in literature as a way of expressing anxieties about deviance. I am concerned with the ways women have (and do) come to terms with their own perceived deviance. In exploring this issue, I hope to place conceptions of deviance and normality into a larger perspective, understanding its many forms, whether based on the physical formation of the body, the color of skin, or the nature of sexual behavior.

The Monsters of Millenium Hall

Although the focus of this study is on works written in America roughly one hundred years ago, my interest in the use of radically deformed bodies to depict deviance began with a reading of an English feminist utopia, A Description of Millenium Hall, written in the eighteenth-century by Sarah Robinson Scott. Millenium Hall combines a utopian setting with bitter social commentary as it recounts the stories of a group of upper-class ladies who, after suffering the usual travails imposed on innocent young women by rapacious men in a patriarchal society, form a more or less egalitarian community, devoted to personal fulfillment through education and the arts, and governed by women. Millenium Hall is located in an idyllic pastoral setting, with open pastures where sheep and cattle graze, wooded forests filled with wildlife, streams stocked with fish, and elaborate gardens and hedges. It is, in the words of the astounded male narrator who has come across it on his travels, "a female Arcadia," whose residents are "epicures in rural pleasures, and enjoy them to the utmost excess to which they can be carried" (177).

In its theme and setting, Millenium Hall seems to be an early prototype of the kind of feminist utopian novel that gained popularity in the late nineteenth century, especially in America, and which had a resurgence in the 1970's. However, there is one section of the narrative describing one area of the utopian topography that appears not to fit. In the very beginning of the novel, on his first morning at Millenium Hall, the male narrator is taken by his hosts on a survey of the grounds. As they walk away from the main house, he sees a green fence or "pale," seven or eight feet high, lined with a hedge of evergreens. When he asks what it is, his hosts equivocate, refusing to answer him directly. He speculates that perhaps the fence contains a zoo but is told, in no uncertain terms, that the ladies do not believe in imprisoning wild animals or anything else for amusement. After pressing for an explanation, his hosts finally admit that the fence encloses an asylum for "monsters"--dwarfs and giants who they have rescued from the emotional humiliation and physical abuse of public exhibition.¹

¹ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the eighteenth-century would have understood the word "monster," to refer to "any animal or plant deviating in one or more of its parts from

One of the women explains that the “monsters” have been victims of a world ruled by men as cruel as the Greek thief, Procrustus, who tied his victims to a bed, cutting the legs of those too long and stretching those too short until they fit his own standard. In what amounts to a defense of deviance, she generalizes that almost all men behave like Procrustes when they “abridge their liberty, and torment by scorn, all who either fall short, or exceed the usual standard” (45). The “monsters” are not the only deformed misfits to live at Millenium Hall. The housekeeper has a maimed hand, the cook is lame, the kitchen-maid has one eye, the dairy-maid is deaf, the housemaid has only one hand, and the musicians who perform in the evening concerts all have some form of physical abnormality.

Deformed houseservants and musicians, grotesque dwarfs and giants--what, I wondered, were these embodiments of aberration and disorder doing in an idealized utopian community that was, in all other respects, a model of beauty, order, and harmony? What fictional purposes could these “monsters” possibly have served? What psychological and emotional concerns might they have been expressing?

Nina Auerbach observed, in Communities of Women (1978) that men have always viewed women without men as deformed monstrosities. In writing about male attitudes towards communities of women, she cites the mythical Graie, three ancient sisters whose single eye was stolen by the hero, Perseus, who used his appropriation of their power to bring them helplessly to defeat, and the legendary Amazons who, despite their vigor and the strength of their will, symbolized by their self-mutilated breasts, were continually being vanquished by the solitary male hero who used them as material on which to “chisel his heroism.” As communities of women without men, the Graie and the Amazons “are seen immediately as mutilated” and, consequently, “both groups are outcast” (3-4). But these are the perceptions of men. What happens when it is a woman who directs her own gaze on herself and then takes up the pen to write what she sees? What does it mean when the image she sees is deformed?

the normal type; specifically an animal afflicted with some congenital malformation.” More specifically, the word was used to describe human beings, such as giants and dwarfs, who were born with abnormal bodies.

Auerbach's observations provided a key to understanding the function of the deformed figures in Millenium Hall. By incorporating an enclosure of monsters into the idealized community of aristocratic ladies, Scott was acknowledging, in order to subvert, the male perception that women who chose to live outside the heterosexual economy, with other women and without men, are inherently defective, deviant, and even monstrous. Recognizing that women who refused to be dependent upon men were generally seen as "mutilated" and "outcast," she embodied these very qualities in the misfit dwarfs and giants, and created a safe, orderly, and clearly defined space for them. The "monsters" in Millenium Hall represented the one attribute of the ladies themselves that was most deviant, most unacceptable, most vulnerable, and most oppressed by the dominant male society--their sexuality. The chaste, classical way of life that Scott envisioned in Millenium Hall represented the achievement of an intellectual and spiritual ideal; the grotesque monsters who lived behind the pale on the outer boundaries of the utopian community, marginalized, misunderstood, but carefully protected from the intruding gaze of outsiders, represented the deviant sexuality of women who loved other women, a sexuality that needed to be hidden in order to be safe. The monsters of Millenium Hall were like distorted mirror images, deformed doppelgangers, hidden in the margins of the text, and giving external form to those aspects of the ladies that were perceived by themselves as well as by the world as being most deviant.²

Texts

Returning to American literature, I was surprised to find numerous occurrences of a similar narrative strategy, if strategy it was.³ Time after time I came across a character, sometimes holding a central place in the text but

² A more detailed discussion of this text is found in "Mothers and Monsters in Sarah Robinson Scott's Millenium Hall" in Utopian and Science Fiction by Women: Worlds of Difference (1994), edited by Jane L. Donawerth and Carol A. Kolmerten.

³ The first edition of Millenium Hall published in the United States was Crittenden's 1955 reprint. However, a pirated and condensed version of its sequel, The Man of Real Sensibility, or the History of Sir George Ellison (1766) was published in Philadelphia in 1797 (Crittenden 43). I have no evidence that any of my authors were familiar with any of Scott's works and certainly make no claim of any direct influence.

more often as marginalized as Scott's monsters, who embodied at least one and often a combination of physical deformities that were, to say the least, extraordinary. In nearly every case, the deformed figure stood in a particular relationship to a physically "normal" female protagonist who seemed to embody the characteristics attributed to the ideal or "true" woman, either mirroring the latter's inner sense of abnormality or allowing her to oppose and defy the forces of convention. In other cases, the deformed figure was herself the central character, serving as a figure of deviance and defiance for the author.

I have chosen to concentrate on a group of texts depicting such figures that were written by certain American women writers who produced most of their important works during the half-century from approximately 1860, as the Civil War was beginning, to approximately 1910, when the modern era was coming into being. In focusing my attention on these works, I am not claiming that deformed, freakish, and monstrous figures are unique either to women writers, American writers, or this literary period. However, I do propose that some American women writers of the late nineteenth century had particular reasons for responding to the social and cultural norms of their times with defiance, anxiety, or both and that, in doing so, they often used deformed figures to represent their own sense of deviance. Consequently, the appearance of deformed figures during this period is unusually frequent and especially significant.

My choice of writers and texts has not been arbitrary but neither were they the only choices available. I based my selection of Spofford, Davis, Phelps, Freeman, and Gilman on a number of factors. Obviously one criterion was that they wrote their most important works between 1860 and 1910. More specifically, I limited the field to writers who were held in some degree of critical or popular acclaim during their own lifetimes. Consequently, all of the writers in this study were well-known figures and most were considered to be among the best writers of their time, although their reputations vary today. From this group, I selected writers whose works interested me, either because they held some literary value, even though not everyone would agree on the specific nature or degree of that value, or because the flaws in their works had particular meaning in the context of my theme. Finally, I looked for a range of

styles and subject matters within the limits set by my topic and period, because I want to show that the figure of deformity crossed lines of genre and style. This means that my readings of these writers and their works are often from a different perspective than the usual one. While Spofford is generally seen as a writer of romance, Davis and Phelps as social reformers, Freeman as a local color realist, and Gilman as a feminist theorist who occasionally dabbled in fiction, these categories mean less to me than the common problems they were addressing in their work.

My selection of texts was also neither arbitrary nor inevitable. Of course, they needed to offer interesting examples of the theme I was exploring--the use of physically deformed figures to depict deviance. In addition, I looked for works that had an important place within the writer's body of work. I was somewhat surprised to find that in all cases at least one of the most interesting occurrences of deformity appeared in a very early work, often in the author's first important publication. Since a writer's first major work is often an exploration of issues of special personal importance, this suggests that figures of deformity had particular personal meanings for these writers. It was also usually the case that the works selected were among those that had been noticed by the writer's contemporaries as well as by recent critics as having particular literary merit. Generally, I avoided texts that were obscure or uncharacteristic of an author's work.

Writers Not Included

In many important respects, the writers I have selected for this study share a common background. Besides being born within a thirty-year period (1831 to 1860), all are white and were born into old New England families. These are the writers who most frequently and powerfully used figures of deformity in their writing. Other writers who also used these figures but who, for various reasons, I have decided not to include--such as Louisa May Alcott, Kate Chopin, Sarah Orne Jewett, Willa Cather, and Edith Wharton--have similar backgrounds. This suggests that the depiction of physical deformity as a literary strategy held particular meaning for women who were born into the social and ethnic group that saw itself as the dominant citizens of the nation. Deviance, for these women, had a special meaning that was different from

what it meant to those whose social position was marginalized by race, class, and national origin.

The absence of figures of deformity in works by African-American women writers in particular is worth considering. It is not because of the lack of texts. The turn of the century was a time when women writers of African-American background--such as Frances E. W. Harper, Pauline Hopkins, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, to name only a few--were beginning to publish fiction and poetry of high quality in the newly established Black press.⁴ The situation seems to be that the figure of deformity did not serve a useful function for Black writers. On the contrary, American writers whose skin color marked them as "different" seemed to seek images which provided physical signs of sameness, rather than difference. The mulatto, which appears with such frequency in the works of African-American writers, was such a figure, physically embodying the qualities that were considered normal and desirable for women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The mulatto was tragic not because of any inherent fault in body, mind, or spirit, but rather because of social prejudices over which they had no control. Her dilemma was that even though she looked like a perfect (white) woman on the outside, and acted in accordance with the principles of true womanhood in her personal life, she was trapped by an identity which others had constructed as the opposite of womanly. Her neutralized skin color was as much as trope for normality as the deformed body was a trope for deviance. The figure of the mulatto, as it was used in fiction written by women of African-American heritage, forced the reader to understand that the depiction of the African-American as deviant had nothing to do with his or her essential nature but was a product of a society which "read" racial difference as a sign of inferiority.

White women, on the other hand, projected their feelings of deviance onto images that provided visible evidence of difference--figures of deformity which were, in most cases, also marked by skin color that was different from the white norm. The deformed figure that appeared in the works of White

⁴ These works have been made available to scholars in present times through numerous reprints, including those of the Oxford University Press's series on Black Women Writers.

women served a function related to but opposite from that of the mulatto in the works of Black women. As Paula Giddings has written, "If the cult [of True Womanhood] caused Black women to prove they were ladies, it forced White ladies to prove that they were women" (54).

The Changing Canon

Jane Tompkins titled the final chapter of Sensational Designs (1985) with the question that most frequently arises when a work by a relatively unknown women writer is discussed: "But Is It Any Good?" As Tompkins pointed out, the assumption that lies beneath that question is that any work with genuine literary merit would have survived the test of time as demonstrated by its inclusion in the canon of great literature now considered worth reading. She argued that such an assumption was fallacious by showing that "even in the last sixty years, the literary canon has undergone more than one major shift as the circumstances within which critics evolved their standards of judgment changed" (187). To demonstrate her point, she compared two anthologies of American literature separated by over forty years: Fred Lewis Pattee's Century Readings for a Course in American Literature (1919) and Perry Miller's Major Writers of America (1962), showing that during that time the number of writers considered worth reading diminished from "hundreds" to twenty-eight. Moreover, in addition to radically reducing the number of writers that made up the American canon, there had been, in her words, "a virtual rewriting of literary history, as entire periods, genres, and modes of classification disappear" (189).

The writers who make up this study have been largely ignored for the past fifty years, but all of them were seen, a mere hundred years ago, as among the leading writers and thinkers of their time. Something happened to the shape of American literature during the twentieth century that both reduced its scope and un-diversified its character, causing the virtual erasure of at least two generations of women writers. Some feminist critics have placed the blame for this shift as far back as Hawthorne, whose infamous statement about "the damned mob of scribbling women," seems to typify the sexism inherent in American literature. Others have attributed it to the masculinization of American society that occurred after the turn of the century. Noting that the professionalization of the study of American

literature was occurring around the same time, Paul Lauter has pointed out in "Race and Gender in the Shaping of the American Literary Canon: A Case Study from the Twenties" (1983) that critical authority passed from readers and popular writers, who included a significant number of women, to professors, who were almost exclusively white, male, and middle or upper middle class. Fearing that their profession would be seen as feminine rather than masculine, these academics helped create an era in which male writers were taken far more seriously than women. According to Lauter, women were virtually written out of the canon by the 1920's. (Lauter noted that the canon had never been open to writers, men or women, who were African-American or recent immigrants.) As Susan K. Harris has more dramatically put the case, early twentieth century critics saw women writers as "Monstrously Female: excessive and vicious" (7).

Given these analyses, it is a little surprising to discover that many women writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries still held a place of esteem in surveys of American literature up until around 1940. Fred Lewis Pattee was one of the pioneers in introducing American literature to the academy. In addition to his anthology, noted by Tompkins, Pattee produced a series of important and influential critical books on American literature including Sidelights on American Literature (1915), The Development of the American Short Story: An Historical Survey (1923) and The New American Literature, 1890-1930 (1930). Pattee not only includes Spofford, Davis, Phelps, and Freeman in these works, but gives them prominent places as writers of quality, reputation, and influence. (Gilman was not included, probably because her reputation was based on her non-fiction feminist analyses rather than on her fiction and poetry.) Pattee was not unique. A glance at two of the classic surveys of American literature, Arthur H. Quinn's American Fiction: A Historical Survey (1936) and Van Wyck Brook's New England: Indian Summer (1940), show the same thing. Judging by these works, every undergraduate student of American literature should have had some familiarity with these writers.

It appears that the definitive shift in the shape of the canon did not occur until 1941, with the the publication of F.O. Matthiessen's American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman. With

its focus on one five-year period of American literature, this brilliantly written and conceived book almost single-handedly reduced the writers to be taken seriously by a subsequent generation of critics to a handful--Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman--and the period to be studied to one--the decade of the 1850's. Ironically, Matthiessen's first published work, and the topic of his doctoral dissertation, had been a critical biography of Sarah Orne Jewett, one of the most talented writers of the late nineteenth century whose work has since been largely ignored, in part because of the influence of his own subsequent work. It is difficult to imagine a greater contrast than that between the image of Jewett, writer of carefully crafted stories about the lives of rural women on the coast of Maine, and the portrait of Donald McKay, builder of ships, which serves as the frontispiece for American Renaissance. In his acknowledgements in that book, Matthiessen credits the pioneering work of Van Wyck Brooks for helping to establish the field of American literature, but he also finds fault with him for being too indiscriminating in his subjects. In Matthiessen's words:

[Brooks] was no longer concerned with ideas, or with critical discriminations, but with describing the surfaces of the milieu that had produced the writing, good or bad. His picture is charming but sentimental. His method is most successful in its vignettes of minor and forgotten figures. (xvii)

Matthiessen chose, in contrast, to "draw a circle of definition around my subject," and to apply the critical principles of Coleridge and T.S. Eliot to his selections. Certainly, few books are as unified and clearly defined as his. One is tempted to suggest that his effort to smooth the edges of history by drawing a neat and well-formed circle around his subject reflects a need to achieve perfect form and to eliminate anything that does not seem to fit the mold--anything, in other words, that might create an appearance of disorder and deformity.⁵

⁵ Matthiessen's statement echoes that of Moses Coit Taylor who, according to Showalter in Sister's Choice, stated in History of American Literature, 1607-1765 (1878) that he wanted a literature "single in its commanding ideas" and "its development toward uniformity" (15).

Matthiessen's American Renaissance dominated the study of American literature during the three decades that followed its publication. It was still the master text when I began graduate study in 1966, and it determined which writers would be read, studied, and written about. The strangest outcome of this book, and the many studies of Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman that followed it, was a far-reaching literary misogyny that almost completely eliminated women writers from the history of nineteenth-century American literature. Consequently, even a comprehensive critical literary history like Literature and the American Tradition (1960), written by Leon Howard, with whom I studied in the late 1960's, though it dealt with approximately two hundred and fifty authors, included only thirty women. The only nineteenth-century woman writer to receive more than a passing reference was Harriet Beecher Stowe. Spofford, Phelps, Freeman, and Gilman are never mentioned at all; Davis's name appears once, in a sentence with eight others.

Due to the efforts of numerous feminist critics and scholars of American literature during the past two decades, these "disappeared" writers are being recovered and reevaluated. Spofford has been the slowest to reemerge. Only one collection of her short stories has been reprinted and there have been only six entries under her name in the MLA bibliography since 1981. The only full-length study is a doctoral dissertation from 1935 that is more biographical than critical. Davis has had, in one respect, a spectacular recovery. Due in part to the efforts of Tillie Olsen, her first published story, "Life in the Iron Mills," has been admitted to the current version of the canon and has generated twenty-eight entries in the MLA, including two full-length studies, in addition to Olsen's long essay. Her canonized status assures that there will be more to come. However, more of her works must be reprinted. The situation is nearly the opposite with Phelps who leads the group in the amount of her work that has been reprinted, especially her novels. Critical studies, however, have followed more slowly. There are only nineteen entries for her in the MLA, although they include two full-length critical studies. There is also a full-length study of her life and works that was published in 1939. As a writer and feminist, Phelps deserves more attention than she has received. More than any of the other writers in this study,

Freeman has maintained an underground popularity throughout the twentieth century, but there has been a major revival in recent years, with more work coming out regularly. Fifty-eight entries for her appear in the MLA and there are now five full-length volumes devoted to her, including a critical biography published in 1956, an annotated volume of her collected letters, a collection of critical essays, and two more recent studies of her life and works. Her stories have been collected in a number of volumes, but reprints of her novels are not yet available. There has also been a major revival of interest in Gilman's life and work. Her literary reputation, however, has been based almost exclusively on two works: her first published short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) which has not only been incorporated into the canon but has been cited as a paradigmatic feminist text, and her feminist utopia, Herland (written in 1915 and published in book form in 1979). The majority of the ninety-five entries listed in the MLA bibliography are on these two works, including two casebooks on "The Yellow Wallpaper." There also have been three critical biographies on Gilman published in the last decade.

Critical Methods

In general, the critical methodology I bring to these writers and their texts might best be described as eclectic and opportunistic. Being a literary critic, rather than an historian or biographer, my focus remains always on the literary text and my primary method is to read that text closely with an eye to detail and nuance. In these readings, I utilize a number of critical strategies including attention to genre, narrative structure, and language. Because the deformed figures on whom I focus my attention are often marginalized in the text, their significance is not always apparent when viewed only from the traditional perspectives of plot, character, and theme; they also must be read semiotically, that is, as non-verbal signs that are meaningful because of shared cultural assumptions.

Although my primary method is close readings of the texts, I believe that writers work within specific contexts, that they write with various purposes in mind, and that their works have consequences on their own lives and on the people who read them. Therefore, I bring to bear whatever information is available that can shed light on the meaning of a particular

work or body of work. Especially in a study such as this, with its focus on works written during a particular time period, historical and biographical contexts are critical to perceiving what is going on in the works being considered. These works in particular benefit from an understanding of the rapid changes taking place in American society at the time they were being written, and the impact of those changes on the lives of the writers who produced them. As many historians and literary critics have recently pointed out, the late nineteenth century was a time of extraordinary redefinition on nearly every level of American life as the meanings of race, nationality, class, education, work, gender, family, and sexuality were being reframed to adjust to new circumstances and new ideas. Not coincidentally, this period also saw the emergence of a new generation of women who aspired to intellectual and creative lives that matched those previously available only to white men from economically and socially privileged backgrounds. This confluence of circumstances resulted in a body of literary works by women writers that hold unusual interest for students of literature and history.

I have approached the authors and texts in this study from a feminist perspective that draws upon the critical theory that has developed over the past two decades and the political analyses that proceeded them, going back at least as far as Mary Wollstonecraft. As an overreaching principle, this means that my readings of the texts and biographies of the writers that make up this study take into account the fact of gender differences and the ways that gender is inscribed in literary texts. I also read these texts as a woman who is a lesbian and I believe that my position outside the heterosexual norm provides an ability and willingness to recognize behavior in the lives of my subjects and material in their texts that was considered deviant in their own time and that might be described as lesbian by today's definitions. I have tried, in my interpretations, to avoid the extremes of what Denise Riley called "over-feminization" and "under-feminization"--the belief, on the one hand, that everything in women's writing can be explained by gender, and the neglect, on the other hand, of gender inscriptions in women's texts.

Reading in the Margins

The monsters of Millenium Hall reside on the boundaries of both the utopian community to which they have been brought and the text in which

their story is told. The reader is informed that their lives are spent hidden and protected behind a pale on the outskirts of the community, and their place in the text occupies only seven pages out of two hundred and sixty-two. Feminist critics have demonstrated that reading women's texts requires paying attention to elements like the monsters that while present in the text are de-centralized, hidden in the margins, and so easily disregarded. Earlier in this century, Virginia Woolf urged us in A Room Of One's Own (1929) to see the "force in things which one had overlooked" (100).

Specific reading strategies that attend to the hidden and the flawed have been among the major contributions of feminist critics of the last two decades. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar led the way when they demonstrated in The Madwoman in the Attic (1979) that the most significant meanings of a literary work are often found hidden underneath its apparent plot and theme. They argued that

female artists all dealt with central female experiences from a specifically female perspective. But this distinctly feminine aspect of their art has been generally ignored by critics because the most successful women writers often seem to have channeled their female concerns into secret or at least obscure corners. (72)

They suggested that such writers "produced literary works that are in some sense palimpsestic, that is whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning" (73). Such works demand readings that are willing to go beyond the obvious and to decode the perplexing. Gubar took this argument a step further in "'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity" (1981) when she showed how the women writer's "image of herself as text and artifact has affected her attitudes toward her physicality and how these attitudes in turn shape the metaphors through which she images her creativity" (295). Gubar illustrated her point with a reading of Isak Dinesen's short story, "The Blank Page," in which she showed how even blankness can be a trope for artistic defiance. In this study, I extend these insights to the figure of deformity.

Feminist critics have gone further by arguing that certain textual characteristics in the works of women writers that have been dismissed as evidence of bad writing may in fact be signs of rebellion against cultural constructs that are restrictive to women. Nancy K. Miller has shown in "Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction," for instance, that women writers have often developed characters that refuse to follow rules of expected behavior. In her words: "To build a narrative around a character whose behavior is deliberately idiopathic, however, is not merely to create a puzzling fiction but to fly in the face of a certain ideology (of the text and its context), to violate a grammar of motives that describes while prescribing" (Subject 26). She argues further that "the peculiar shape of a heroine's destiny in novels by women, the implausible twists of plot so common in these novels, is a form of insistence about the relation of women to writing: a comment on the stakes of difference within the theoretical indifference of literature itself" (39).

The deformed figures that are my subject are often found in the margins of the text, removed from the main action, taking the form of either a minor character whose role appears to be tangential to the story's action or an anthropomorphic image meant to represent some quality of or dilemma for the protagonist. In some texts, deformed figures seem to just appear, as if for no reason. They have no apparent role in the plot and bear no obvious relationship to any of the "main" characters, but rather appear to be incongruent, implausible, superfluous, or contradictory to the main action and theme of the narrative. They are enigmas. But like Sibyl's leaves in Mary Shelley's The Last Man, read by Gilbert and Gubar as a trope for the tradition of women's writing that has been "scattered, fragmented, barely comprehensible," they are available for discovery and "di-ciphering" (Madwoman 97-8). To read in the margins means watching for those characters or images that seem to be irrelevant or inconsistent with the plot and theme, and, instead of overlooking them or writing them off as flaws or mistakes, using them as clues to the author's meaning.

Biography and Autobiography

My readings have benefitted from the availability of a significant amount of contemporary biographical and autobiographical material. The late nineteenth century was a gossipy time. The public was fascinated by the lives of writers, especially popular ones who appeared regularly in the magazines. They were interviewed by journalists and their homes were visited; articles were written about their likes and dislikes, the way they decorated their homes, the writers they admired, their working habits. Then, as today, the press could enhance popularity and sales, or it could turn on anyone whose behavior was unconventional, as it did when Mary Wilkins kept postponing her marriage even though she was nearly fifty, and when Charlotte Perkins had the audacity to seek a divorce from her husband and then to turn the raising of her child over to him and his new wife. The nineteenth-century interest in the lives of women writers was fed not only by newspaper and magazine articles but also by the publication of memoirs and autobiographies. All but one of the writers in this study published some form of autobiography during their lifetimes. Spofford's A Little Book of Friends (1916), Davis's Bits of Gossip (1904), Phelps's Chapters From A Life (1896), and Gilman's posthumous The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1935). The only exception is Mary Wilkins Freeman, who was adamantly opposed to personal revelations; but even she published, tongue in cheek, an article called "An Autobiography" (1917), which was really a disavowal of one of her most popular stories. It is interesting that Spofford and Davis used titles that trivialized their works and took attention away from their own lives to their observations about others. Phelps and Gilman, who were born later in the century and who were more consciously feminist, were willing to focus attention on themselves in their titles, Phelps through a literary analogy and Gilman an economic one.

Nineteenth-century readers assumed that there were biographical connections between the lives of authors and the fiction they wrote. Along with their fascination with the private lives of writers, the popular imagination seemed to conflate authors' lives with their books and characters, a practice that was accepted by most authors as well as readers. There is a striking example of this in a popular book of the time, Our Famous

Women: An Authorized Record of the Lives and Deeds of Distinguished American Women of Our Times by Twenty Eminent Authors (1884), in which various well-known women provide short biographies of each other.⁶ Included in the book is a full-page illustration with the caption: "An Incident in the Life of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps--'Thimble or Paint Brush, Which?'" (574-75). The illustration shows two women, one standing with a paint brush in her hand and the other sitting at her sewing. The image, with its iconography opposing the creative and domestic life, is clearly a reference to Phelps's novel, The Story of Avis (1877), about the disastrous consequences when a woman artist marries and is caught in a conflict between her art and her wifely duties. The caption indicates that the editors of the book, probably with Phelps's permission, conflated her with her character, Avis Dobell. (Phelps indicated in letters and in her autobiography that the character also was based on her mother.) For modern critics, it is tempting to speculate as well on whether the image published in 1884, drawn from an earlier novel yet claiming to be an incident in the author's life, might relate to the relationship that Phelps began that year with Herbert Dickinson Ward--a friendship which led to marriage four years later, when she was forty and he twenty-three.

Today, relating biographical and autobiographical material to an author's texts is understood to be a delicate and risky task. Nonetheless, it is one I have felt it important to undertake. It is my belief that writers write about ideas and characters that interest them because they have deep relevance to their own lives. Therefore, the more we "know" about the life and thoughts of an author, the better we can understand her work. My intent in introducing biographical information in this study has been to cast light upon the text, not to use the text to cast light on the life of the author. However, as useful as biographical information can be, the problem is always that we only can "know" what we are able or willing to see, and what we see, or think we see, is subject to our own desires and preconceptions. The Mary Wilkins Freeman described by a biographer in the conformist 1950's is, to a

⁶ Rose Terry Cooke writes about Harriet Beecher Stowe and Harriet Spofford; Harriet Spofford writes about Rose Terry Cooke and Mary Louise Booth; Elizabeth Phelps writes about Mary Livermore (a social reformer); and Elizabeth Spring writes about Elizabeth Phelps.

large extent, a different person from the one described in the revisionist 1990's. The person who Charlotte Perkins Gilman described in the autobiography she wrote at the end of her life is a combination of the person she wanted to be, the person she wanted to be seen as by future generations, and the person she was able to see herself as being from the perspective of a woman of seventy-five who was writing about experiences that took place during an earlier era. In the same way, despite my own efforts to be objective in introducing biographical information, my vision is sometimes limited by my personal biases and perspectives. I hope it is sometimes just as true that my unique angle of vision can shed new light on my material. In either case, I am convinced that there is no way to look at anything from any perspective other than our own--that is, that true "objectivity" is impossible--and that the best ways to avoid distortion are first of all to meet our subjects on their own grounds whenever possible, and secondly to remain conscious of our biases and acknowledge them whenever we can.

Historical Contexts

Reign of Normality

The fifty-year period roughly extending from 1860 until 1910 was a time of radical social, political, and economic change, especially in the United States, during which the emergence of political feminism, the trauma of the Civil War, the emancipation of African-American slaves, the industrialization of the American economy with its consequent shifts in class structure, the increase of immigrants with their strange languages and customs, the conceptualization of homosexuality by the medical and scientific community, all worked together to create a society in which very little could be taken for granted. It was a time when cultural categories and social norms were being constructed, rigidified, and challenged all at the same time. As rapid change threatened traditionally held beliefs regarding national and personal identity, it was met by conservative attempts to establish rigid norms to try to contain the overwhelming forces of change.

The late nineteenth century saw the culmination of the pseudo-scientific act of classification that had begun to thrive in the eighteenth century. In the words of historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Taxonomy

assumed unquestioned scientific centrality as Victorian men traced the precise evolution of their social as well as their natural world" (Duberman 268). The activity of naming and separating things imposed an appearance of order on a world that threatened to be chaotic by creating categories into which everything could be neatly placed. Anything that did not fit these categories was seen as an anomaly that was, depending on the category and the nature of the disorder, benign or monstrous. This categorization of objects, people, behavior, and so forth, defined normality and abnormality. Subject to the perspective of the "categorizer," anyone whose "essential" characteristics were different was defined as deviant. This included anyone who was not white, middle-class, European-American, heterosexual, and, to some extent, even male.

Freaks

One effect of the nineteenth-century urge to classify was a fascination that bordered on an obsession with people who were physically different, either by being a member of an "exotic race" or by being born with a physical anomaly. The science of teratology, the study of monsters, replaced the earlier view that physical anomalies were signs from God. With the rationale of scientific research to support their activities, scientists and doctors felt at liberty to display and examine deformed individuals when they were alive and to dissect their bodies when they were dead. Any claim to individual privacy was overruled by the interests of science.⁷

The fascination with people who looked "different" also found a popular outlet in the freak show, a form of entertainment which was extraordinarily popular around the turn of the century. The exhibition of exotic and deformed people had begun during the eighteenth century. The monsters of Millenium Hall, for example, had been rescued from a life of public display, and William Wordsworth described the "freaks of nature" exhibited at the festival of St. Bartholomew in a nightmarish passage of The

⁷ Sandor L. Gilman has addressed the cultural meanings of these scientific and medical examinations of people who were different in a number of studies, including "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature" (1985), and Inscribing the Other (1991).

Prelude (Book Seventh, lines 652-95, 1805 edition). But the genre really flourished in the United States from around 1840 into the early twentieth century. Robert Bogdan documents the history of this phenomenon in Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit (1988).

Following the success of P. T. Barnum whose American Museum was founded in New York City in 1840, numerous exhibition halls and dime museums were established in major cities throughout the United States. In New York, the Bowery and Coney Island had scores of such venues. In addition, according to Bogdan, "hundreds of freak shows traversed America in the last quarter of the nineteenth and the first quarter of the twentieth centuries" (2) and thousands of carte de visites and cabinet photographs of popular freaks were circulated and displayed in people's home. Many of these "freaks" were physically deformed--dwarfs, giants, Siamese twins, and people missing arms and/or legs, were among the most popular. Others suffered, or so it was claimed, from various forms of retardation. Still others were members of exotic races, from places like the south sea islands and Africa, who billed as being "wild" or prehuman, with animal-like features and behavior. Although one would think that a society concerned about proper classifications would make a distinction between these forms of difference, they were in fact commonly conflated. As Bogdan shows, "in the last quarter of the nineteenth century the blurred distinction between species and freaks of nature became moot; all human exhibits, including tribal people of normal stature and body configuration, as well as people who performed unusual feats such as swallowing swords, fell under the generic term 'freak'" (7).

It is my contention that the freak figure emerged as an apt trope for women writers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the chapters that follow, we see the reoccurrence of characters who are physically deformed, and sometimes also mentally deficient and racially marked. Although their meaning and significance vary from writer to writer, they all represent a specific response to powerful feelings of deviance that caused these writers to identify with people who were so different that they were defined as monsters and freaks. We can imagine some of these writers identifying with Carson McCuller's Frankie in "The Member of the Wedding" (1946): "She was afraid of all the Freaks, for it seemed to her that they had looked at her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with

hers, as though to say: we know you" (272). Others might agree with the twentieth-century photographer, Diane Arbus: "There's a quality of legend about freaks. Like a person in a fairy tale who stops you and demands that you answer a riddle."

Racial Differences

Up until the Civil War, the nation had still been able to see itself as a relatively homogeneous society composed primarily of descendents of Northwestern Europeans, who dominated over smaller groups of non-whites, primarily the "Indian" peoples who were indigenous and the slaves taken from Africa to provide cheap labor on "New World" plantations. Perhaps in order to justify unimaginable cruelty and exploitation, the identities of both these groups were constructed in such a way as to define them as being, at best, culturally deficient and, at worst, subhuman, establishing a tradition of racism in America which has not yet been erased. During the latter part of the century, successive waves of immigrants from eastern and southern European countries, as well as from the middle east and Asia, rapidly transformed what had once seemed like a homogeneous society into a "melting pot" of diverse races and ethnic groups. This new source of labor was at first welcomed and encouraged, but as these "foreigners" became more visible, reactions to "strange" cultural practices and doubts about the national identity created an aversion to difference. At the same time the nation was opening its doors to immigrants, the changed status of newly freed African-Americans created a widespread concern with "the Race Question," as the country struggled with how to assimilate a group of people who could no longer be looked on as chattel. To further complicate popular attitudes towards difference, this period also saw the final and most controversial battles in a full-fledged war against the continent's indigenous peoples that resulted in mass killings.

This shift to a racially and ethnically diverse society was accompanied by an increased differentiation of people by class. The extraordinarily rapid transformation of the United States from an agrarian economy based on ownership of land to an industrial economy based on the investment of capital and the exploitation of workers meant that class differences became more visible, more important, and more complex than they had been.

Because many members of the new working class were immigrants from central and southern Europe and Asia, or newly-emancipated African-Americans, class and race were often conflated in people's minds. Moreover, because the nineteenth century reduced racial difference to three categories--white, black, and yellow--and since the category "white" came to stand for northern Europeans only, and "black" referred primarily to the former African-American slaves, the term "yellow" came to apply to everyone else. As Susan Lanser put it in her essay on "The Yellow Wallpaper," the racial designation of yellow was applied "not only to the Chinese, Japanese, and light-skinned African-Americans but also to Jews, Poles, Hungarians, Italians, and even the Irish" (426). The pseudoscientific categorization of races led to absurd cross-classifications and hierarchies that found reflection in the literature of the period, like that formulated by Lorenz Oken, an early-nineteenth-century German thinker, who used the senses as a means of differentiating among races, conceiving a "hierarchy of human beings, the highest being the 'Eye-Man, the White, the European' and the lowest being the 'Skin-Man, the Black, the African'" (Gilman, Inscribing 20).

The Cult of True Womanhood and The New Woman

Some historians have argued that the "Cult of True Womanhood" was born of a need to insure that the "American" identity would be preserved in the face of these changes in the demography of the United States. As various forces of change seemed to lay siege to white, middle-class American society, it became more important than ever to emphasize women's role as the mothers of the "race." Any threat to this function was increasingly seen as dangerously deviant. Martha Banta describes this situation as it related to the American girl in Imaging American Women (1987):

It became imperative to classify what it was right for the Girl to be and to keep lists of the biological factors threatening her role as the nation's primary means for identifying its values to the world. Fear grew that the Girl might falter under the forces of change and come to image irregular sexual traits and faulty racial stock. If this happened, the figure of hope for America's future would be transformed into an image foreshadowing the end of all that was good in the culture (biological and social). (104)

Since nineteenth-century women were perceived as being inherently weak, physical and intellectual activities that were not focused on reproduction were viewed as unwomanly behavior that would result in weakening the reproductive organs with disastrous consequences. In a widely read book, Sex In Education; or, A Fair Chance For The Girls (1873), the eminent physician Dr. Edward H. Clarke argued that the education of girls needed to take into account the demands of their developing reproductive systems or the consequences would be disastrous. In his attempt to counter the trend towards equal education and coeducation, Clarke provided case studies of girls whose rigorous educations resulted in poor health, the atrophy of their sexual organs, and even death. Although he pretended to stop short of simply equating education with disability, he confidently asserted that "the number of these [female] graduates [of schools and colleges] who have been permanently disabled to a greater or less degree by these causes is so great, as to excite the gravest alarm, and to demand the serious attention of the community" (62-3).

Despite their ring of authority, such words did not go unchallenged. A group of women led by Julia Ward Howe, and including Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, published a collection of rebuttals titled Sex and Education (1874). Building on the feminist movement that had begun earlier in the century, women who had learned to be social activists through the abolitionist movement and their efforts to improve the lot of the poor and working-classes now organized on their own behalf and, as a result, Americans experienced the promise and the threat of a powerful and vocal feminist movement. These new feminists challenged a society which was grounded in white male privilege and the exploitation of others, including, as they now saw, themselves. They pressed for voting rights for women, an end to men's violence against women and children, access to equal education, equal opportunities for satisfying work, and equal pay. Women organized clubs, political organizations, and colleges. Through their press for social change, they challenged white, middle-class men who seemed to have a firm grip on political, social, and economic power. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg fully describes this development in "The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis, 1870-1936" (1985), demonstrating that the rebellion against the

cult of true womanhood was related to the concurrent emergence of the lesbian as a defined category.

Lesbianism

Some of the most vexing questions that emerge in a discussion of this period have to do with the changing nature of personal relationships and sexuality. A number of historians recently have focused attention on relationships between women during the nineteenth century, and the new conceptualizations of homosexuality and lesbianism at the end of the century. The central questions that have emerged from these debates have to do with chronology and definition. In other words, much of the controversy seems to be focused on who did or felt what when and what it was that they did or felt. Although the issues that rightly belong to this discussion cover the full range of intimate relationships between human beings, my present concern is with the changing nature of emotional and sexual relationships between women during the second half of the nineteenth century and into the first decade of the twentieth. The key questions I have had to ask have to do with the extent to which sexuality played a role in the relationships between women during the period I am studying and the extent to which those relationships were defined as deviant and pathological.

In 1928, Radclyffe Hall's Stephen Gordon cried out in The Well of Loneliness after reading "a battered old book" by Krafft-Ebing: "there are so many of us--thousands of miserable, unwanted people, who have no right to love, no right to compassion because they're maimed, hideously maimed and ugly--God's cruel; He let us get flawed in the making" (232). Intimate and passionate relationships between women had not always carried such a powerful stigma. In "The Female World of Love and Ritual" (1975), Carroll Smith-Rosenberg showed a cultural environment in which such relationships were not only permitted but encouraged. Analyzing personal writings of women and men in thirty-five families between the 1760's and the 1880's, she documented that feelings and behaviors that would today be defined as lesbian (hence deviant) were understood by the participants and their families to be normal. It is important to emphasize that she did not conclude that these relationships had no sexual component or that there were no relationships between women that were defined as being sexually deviant

but rather that the understanding of the nature of sexuality during this period permitted "a wide latitude of emotions and sexual feelings" (76). Based on Smith-Rosenberg's work, however, some critics have concluded, mistakenly I believe, that all relationships between women prior to the twentieth century were seen by themselves and others as normal, and that few if any of these relationships had a sexual component. These conclusions were supported by Lillian Faderman in Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present (1981). After a thorough examination of the history of women's relationships in modern times, Faderman concluded that "most female love relationships before the twentieth century were probably not genital" (18). Although Faderman did not mean to deny categorically that some women prior to the twentieth century had relationships that included a sexual element, her broad extension of the concept of non-sexual romantic friendship to cover all but the recent past has brought considerable criticism, most recently from Terry Castle in The Apparitional Lesbian (1994).

Related to the debate about the extent to which genital sex between women occurred prior to the twentieth century is the question of when such relationships became defined as lesbian. Following the work of Foucault, historians of sexuality have demonstrated that some kind of shift in the conceptualization of same sex activity occurred some time between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. Most often this has been described as a shift from an emphasis on sexual behavior to an emphasis on sexual identity. The problem with this idea is that it tends to draw the line between behavior and identity too rigidly, assuming that a cultural emphasis on one precludes the existence of the other. By this argument, there could have been no such thing as a homosexual or lesbian prior to their being named as such by scientists. This view also assumes that there could have been no consciousness of deviance prior to the shift in conceptualizations, and leads to assumptions like that of Bonnie Zimmerman in The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction, 1969-1989 (1990) that there could have been no lesbian literature in the past because "[f]ew felt themselves to be different from other women of their time, or to have an identity defined by a particular sexuality" (4).

To some extent, our ability to draw accurate conclusions about how individual writers interpreted their identities and behavior is limited by the scarcity of information about the history of sexuality; research into this relatively new field has just begun. However, part of the problem is that we fail to consider the complexity of the subject and tend to jump to easy conclusions. For example, although she is often erroneously cited as the source for the non-sexual view of nineteenth-century relationships between women because of her best-known essay, Smith-Rosenberg's contributions to our understanding of contemporary views of sexual relationships between women during the latter part of the nineteenth century in other works such as *"Discourses of Sexuality and Subjectivity: The New Woman, 1870-1936"* (1989) are often ignored. Yet in this work she demonstrates that some women born in the mid-nineteenth century not only challenged existing gender relations but were defined as "physiologically 'unnatural,' the symptom of a diseased society" (Duberman 265). In reviewing attitudes towards sexual relationships between women, Smith-Rosenberg cites the work of the well-known sexologist Krafft-Ebing, the same writer whose battered book revealed to Stephen Gordon the extent of her deformity, who as early as 1886 divided lesbianism into four categories of increasing deviance: feminine women who were responsive to the advances of masculine women; women who preferred to dress like men; women who took on male roles; and women who were masculine in every respect of their appearance and behavior except for being born with female genitals. In the face of such ideas, which presumably reflected current opinion as well as they formed it, it is erroneous to work from the assumption, as some scholars have, that there was no awareness of a pathological view of lesbianism into well into the twentieth century.⁸ On the contrary, my argument in this study depends on an understanding that the later half of the nineteenth century was a time when women's consciousness about gender and sexual deviance was especially acute.

⁸ For example, feminist historian Susan Ware recently wrote about some of the challenges she encountered in understanding the nature of the relationship of Molly Dewson, whose biography she was writing, with Polly Porter. Ware mistakenly concludes that "Molly and Polly initiated their partnership in the 1910s, when long-standing and intense female friendships were still a socially acceptable vehicle to a full personal and professional life," and that it was not until the 1920s and 1930s that "love between women was increasingly seen as suspect" (59). Such mistakes can lead to serious misinterpretations.

Another scholar whose contributions to our understanding of the history of female deviance have been neglected by literary critics is George Chauncey, Jr. Especially in his essay "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance" (1983), which I cite often in this study, Chauncey illuminates the nature of the shift that occurred in the late nineteenth century between a view of female deviance that emphasized deviant gender behavior to one that focused on the issue of sexual object choice. This subtle but important shift had an important impact on women writers at the turn of the century by conflating the activity of writing with gender deviance and then sexualizing both.

My point in reviewing these debates and issues is to show how problematic definitions of sexuality are and the extent to which our interpretations of behavior are nevertheless influenced by those definitions. Nowhere is this more true than in biographical and critical studies of individuals and works of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In order to understand the meaning of the texts, both personal and fictional, which are the object of my study, I have attempted to use all the resources at hand that could help me to understand how these writers felt about themselves and their behavior. At the same time, I have not hesitated to use those texts whenever possible as a way of better understanding how their authors conceptualized and felt about their sexual behavior and identities.

Community of Women Writers

Women writers of the nineteenth century, whether their sexuality was deviant or not, were vulnerable to accusations of gender deviance simply because they engaged in the unwomanly act of writing. In a culture which conceived writing as inherently masculine, women with literary aspirations were forced to ask, as Gilbert and Gubar put it, "[i]f the pen is a metaphorical penis, with what organ can females generate texts?" (Madwoman 7). In a cultural climate in which women performing the act of writing were understood to be in violation of appropriate gender behavior, it was natural that women writers experienced feelings of anxiety as well as defiance about their engagement in these activities.

Professional women writers did not begin to appear in America until the early nineteenth century. As Mary Kelley demonstrated in Private Woman, Public Stage (1984), the women of this first generation saw themselves as being forced to challenge convention out of financial need, and suffered guilt and shame because of it. Women writers of the following generation, however, those who began to publish around the onset of the Civil War, had available to them both a feminist theory and a feminist political movement that changed their conception of both the conditions that had historically constrained women and the opportunities that were newly available to them. For this and other reasons, this generation of writers was the first to consider themselves primarily as creative artists rather than as professional writers in a culture that still saw artists as categorically male and white. Elizabeth Ammons writes in Conflicting Stories (1991) that women writers of the late nineteenth century

reflect an emerging, shared, and often defiant confidence in the abilities and rights of women that historians associate with the 'new' middle-class American woman of the period. As such, these writers present a picture of a group of women clearly breaking with the past; and the major break . . . consisted in their avowed ambition, with few exceptions, to be artists. . . . serious women writers at the turn into the twentieth century were determined to invade the territory of high art traditionally posted in western culture as the exclusive property of privileged white men. (4-5)⁹

However, in the climate of Victorian and post-Victorian America, the pressures to conform were powerful. Despite the bravery of their defiance of convention, their activities and aspirations resulted in anxieties that were expressed in their writings. Susan Gubar wrote in "'The Blank Page' and Female Creativity" that "[e]specially in the nineteenth century, women

⁹ Ammons places the first generation to view themselves as artists at the turn of the century, between 1892 to 1912. I argue that women who chose to write rather than marry, and who held artistic aspirations similar to those held by men, came on the scene at least a generation earlier.

writers, who feared their attempts at the pen were presumptuous, castrating, or even monstrous, engaged in a variety of strategies to deal with their anxiety about authorship" (Showalter 295).

To compound the sense of difference caused by their deviant professional role, many of the women artists of this period also deviated from their assigned sexual role in some way. This was true of the writers in this study. Although all of the five eventually married, all but Gilman, whose first early marriage ended in divorce, married late, after they had established their reputations as writers. Spofford married at thirty, but her husband died relatively young and her only child died in infancy. As a widow for the last thirty-three years of her life, she spent most of her time with other women writers and female members of her family. Davis was perhaps the most conventional of the group. Although she did not marry until she was thirty-three, she had three children--two sons and a daughter--who she raised to adulthood. Neither Phelps nor Freeman had any children. Both married late in life, at ages forty-four and fifty, respectively, after spending their younger years in relationships with women, and both married men who were much younger than they. Gilman was involved in a series of unorthodox situations: she married at age twenty-three, divorced at twenty-seven, sent her daughter at age nine to live with her ex-husband, and remarried at forty to her cousin who was seven years younger. Throughout her life, however, her most passionate relationships were with women, including one that she came close to defining as lesbian.

Carolyn Heilbrun reminded us in Writing a Woman's Life (1988) that lives cannot easily be changed without literary models:

What matters is that lives do not serve as models; only stories do that. And it is a hard thing to make up stories to live by. We can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard. We live our lives through texts. They may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmurings of our mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives. (37)

The writers in this study saw themselves as belonging to a community of women writers that shared a common tradition. They read the works of earlier women writers--living and dead. They corresponded with one another, and they met and talked about their work and their lives. They were published by the same publishing houses and magazines, and shared the same editors. Most importantly, perhaps, they read one another. These influences and friendships extended beyond the United States, especially to England and France. Each of the writers in this study saw herself as particularly influenced by certain other woman writers. For Harriet Spofford, it was Rose Terry Cooke and Charlotte Bronte. Spofford and Cooke eventually became close friends, and Spofford was to write a critical and biographical introduction for an American edition of Bronte's Jane Eyre. During her lifetime, Spofford also had a personal relationship with Elizabeth Phelps. Rebecca Harding Davis began her career in the midwest but after the publication of her first story, she met many of the writers of her time, including Emerson, Hawthorne, and Louisa May Alcott. After marrying, she devoted most of her time to her family but her newspaper work kept her in touch with her times. As a child, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps found inspiration in Elizabeth Barrett Browning and as well as in her own mother, the first Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, who had been a writer mostly of children's books. As an adult, she maintained a correspondence with George Eliot, who she viewed as the woman most likely to produce "a great novel to proclaim the royal lineage of the Coming Woman to the average mind" (Phelps to Eliot, February 26, 1873). Phelps also presented a series of lectures on contemporary literature at Boston University in which she featured the work of Eliot. Late in her life, she wrote tributes to Harriet Spofford and Rebecca Harding Davis, both of whose works had a powerful influence on her. Mary Wilkins Freeman admired the stories of her contemporary, Sarah Orne Jewett. In addition to her association with a number of artists and writers in New England, she was particularly influenced by Emily Bronte, about whom she wrote her only critical essay. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was primarily known as a feminist theoretician rather than a literary figure, so she was not a member of the east coast literary community as were the others and was less inclined to mention other writers in her own work. The exception was Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was her great-aunt on her father's side and who

may have inspired her to become a writer. Her work also suggests familiarity with women writers like Spofford and Charlotte Bronte.

As the lives of these writers intertwine throughout the period, certain key people appear again and again, especially publishers and editors. The presence of James T. and Annie Fields is felt continually. As editor of the most prestigious magazine of the time, the Atlantic Monthly, and head of the publishing house, Fields, Osgood, James Fields was the first to bring Spofford, Davis, and Phelps to the attention of the established literary world. In some ways his wife Annie was an even greater influence, especially during her later years, when as a widow, she and her companion, Sarah Orne Jewett, were the center of a circle of accomplished and talented women, who gathered at her home at 148 Charles Street. Spofford, Davis, Phelps, and Freeman all counted Annie Fields as a friend and, through her, met other creative and independent women of the period. Another influential editor was William Dean Howells, who succeeded Fields at the Atlantic, and who knew, and eventually published, the work of all of the subjects of this study. A third person who runs through the lives of many of the women of this period was Mary Louise Booth, editor of Harper's Bazar, a family magazine which published work by many of the important writers of the time. Booth was particularly important to Spofford and Freeman.

Perspectives On Deformity

Deformed bodies and deranged minds

In her introduction to The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives (1986) Susan Suleiman wrote:

The cultural significance of the female body is not only (not even first and foremost) that of a flesh-and-blood entity, but that of a symbolic construct. Everything we know about the body--certainly as regards the past, and even, it could be argued, as regards the present--exists for us in some form of discourse; and discourse, whether verbal or visual, fictive or historical or speculative, is never unmediated, never free of interpretation, never innocent. (2)

The female body that concerns me in this study is one that is deformed, that is, that radically deviates from the body configuration that is considered ideal. My interest is in what that deformity means, in its various appearances, as a symbolic construct within a specific discourse. There are a variety of possible approaches to this subject--historical, psychological, medical, cultural, symbolic, political, and more. My practice is to adopt any approach that is helpful in understanding a particular text or writer, rather than to attempt to base my readings on a single approach or to develop a single theory of deformity.

I use the term "deformity" in its literal and physical senses. My topic is fictional characters or images with human qualities who are primarily defined in the text by bodies that are clearly and visibly deformed, i.e., "marred in appearance, disfigured, distorted, misshapen in body or limbs" (O.E.D.). The figures examined in this study are dwarfed, hunchbacked, crippled, badly scarred, extremely fat, and grotesquely misproportioned. Some are also blind or deaf. Most combine a number of these deformities. Along with being deformed, a significant number of these fictional figures are also visibly marked by skin color to indicate that they are members of a "race" other than "white," including black, mulatto, yellow, and albino. In other words, the deformed figures I am concerned with in this study are characters with bodies that visibly and indisputably fall outside what our society considers "normal." Most also suffer in some way with mental or emotional aberrations that are corollaries to their bodily deformities, ranging from pathological insanity on the one hand to saintliness on the other.

While my definition of deformity is a literal one, the context in which I view deformity is purely literary. My interest is in examining a trope, a figure in a literary work whose meaning is derived from a set of cultural constructions. My study is not in any way about the fact of disability or even about literary interpretations of disability. It is about how the cultural constructions of deformity reflect, are formed by, and impact upon those who are labeled as deviant by other standards, primarily those of gender and sexuality. This being the case, however, it can and should be said that the perception of people who are physically deformed as pathologized or stigmatized in some way is a social construction based upon a standard of

normality that is tyrannical. As Scott pointed out in Millenium Hall, it is the same tyranny that judges women to be inferior to men, is responsible for cruelty based on racist assumptions, and demonizes or pathologizes lesbians and gay men.

To present a character as physically deformed is to present one who is stigmatized by his or her society. Erving Goffman, whose book Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity (1963) is the classic text on the subject, writes that the term stigma was originated by the Greeks “to refer to bodily signs [burned or cut into the body] designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier.” During Christian times, two layers of meaning were added: “the first referred to bodily signs of holy grace that took the form of eruptive blossoms on the skin; the second, a medical allusion to this religious allusion, referred to bodily signs of physical disorder” (1). In the modern era, stigmas are understood as resulting from three different conditions: first, “abominations of the body--the various physical deformities”; second, “blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will, domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs, and dishonesty,” including mental disorder, homosexuality, and crime; and third, “the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion” (4). Those who are stigmatized in any of the ways outlined above are perceived as being different from the norm. As such they are considered to be subhuman, inferior, and dangerous, as well as sometimes having “a ‘sixth sense,’ or ‘understanding’” (5). The fictional figures of deformity that are examined in this study tend to combine all of these stigmatizing traits.

Doppelgangers

Helena Mitchie has written in Sororophobia: Differences among Women in Literature and Culture (1992): “Sensation novels abound with women who disguise, transform, and replicate themselves, who diffuse their identities and scatter clues to them over the surface of their parent texts” (59). In a very few cases, the deformed figures in this study are the main subject of the narrator, but more often, they are secondary or minor characters. These often can be usefully read as deformed doppelgangers in their relationship to the main protagonist. In some texts, we find a clear doubling or pairing of

characters who appear, more or less explicitly, to mirror each other. In others, the doppelganger plays a role so minor that it can be almost overlooked.

In describing these figures as doppelgangers, I mean to evoke a specific literary tradition that had particular meaning during the nineteenth century. Coined by the novelist Jean-Paul Richter in 1796, the doppelganger became a staple of nineteenth-century romantic literature, used to transform the familiar image of the self into something obscure and unfamiliar to the conscious mind. As the century progressed, the figure became increasingly associated with "the depiction of a split within the self that included an examination of its pathological aspects" (Brunel 365). Even more specifically, because of the pathology associated with deviant sexuality as the century drew to a close, the doppelganger began to appear in contexts that had to do with specific fears of homosexuality. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in Between Men (1985), has identified a late nineteenth century genre which she terms "the paranoid Gothic," that involves doubled male figures, one of which feels obsessed or persecuted by the other, with the central image being that of an unspeakable secret having to do with homosexuality. Familiar examples of the genre are Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886) and Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890).

This view of the doppelganger tradition sheds light on some of the texts examined in this study. Although Sedgwick's argument is made primarily in respect to male writers and their anxiety about homosexuality, it can be usefully extended to women writers as well. In this study I argue that deformed doppelgangers in the works of women writers, whether those figures are male or female, can often be read as representations of fears regarding lesbian relationships. This theme emerges especially in the works of Freeman and Gilman, writers who showed the greatest awareness of lesbianism in their private lives and fictional works.

American Female Gothic

Many feminist critics have noted that the gothic tradition has a special importance in women's writings and especially in the writings of American women. In her chapter on "American Female Gothic" in Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing (1991), Elaine

Showalter defines the genre as one that expresses “women's dark protests, fantasies, and fear” (127). Showalter follows the strand of criticism that extends from Ellen Moers, with her theory that the female Gothic is an expression of self-hatred and disgust resulting from women's anxieties regarding birth and creativity, to more recent feminist critics who read through Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva, to equate “the Gothic with the feminine unconscious, and with the effort to bring the body, the semiotic, the imaginary, or the pre-Oedipal [M]Other Tongue into language” (129). Showalter comments that, by de-historicizing the genre, such approaches can suggest an essentialist view of women. Countering this tendency, she argues that “the Female Gothic takes on different shapes and meanings within different historical and national contexts . . . [and that] it has become one of the most versatile and powerful genres of American women's writing, with elements that have changed in relation to changes in women's roles and American culture” (129).

Although I agree with Showalter that it is necessary to question essentialist assumptions and to place literature in its historical context, there are ways in which the grotesque has a particular and complex significance for women. Viewed from the perspective of the dominant male culture, the female body always carries within itself the potential and the actuality of deformity, especially when pregnant. Moreover, judged from the same perspective, the female mind has throughout recent Western history been characterized by qualities that are defined, when seen in a man, as deranged, such as irrationality and emotionalism. Terry Eagleton has expressed this dilemma as follows: “if women speak the discourse of the body, the unconscious, the dark underside of formal speech--in a word, the Gothic--they merely confirm their aberrant status” (Showalter 129).

In a similar vein, Mary Russo observed at a panel of the 1993 MLA conference that the grotesque is the “severe acting out of the dilemmas of femininity.” In an earlier essay “Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory” (1986), Russo provided a helpful criticism of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, specifically pointing out that the Russian critic was unable to develop a notion of the Female Grotesque because he failed to incorporate gender into his concept of “grotesque realism.” Russo suggests that the categorization of

the female body as grotesque “might be used affirmatively to destabilize the idealizations of female beauty or to realign the mechanisms of desire” (221).¹⁰

Deformity as Response to True Womanhood

Viewed in this way, the deformed figures of the late nineteenth century are a direct challenge to the Victorian concept of true womanhood and the ideal female form which embodies it. Everyone can picture that form: it is neat, compact, and well-proportioned, with a waist that can be encircled by two male hands, and a shapely bust and “bustle.” The character of the woman who occupies such a body is kind, modest, nurturing, and passive. Her role is to serve as a helpmate and civilizer of men, especially her husband and sons, by making a home in which they can find spiritual guidance and refuge in a world that is cruel and dangerous. Her story is the familiar plot of the novel: the search for and acquisition of a suitable husband.

Women with deformities are, by bodily definition, excluded from the world of true womanhood. They are unsuited for the roles of wife or mother, and they are incapable of being heroines, at least not in stories that are driven by a conventional marriage plot. As Deborah Kent writes in an essay that looks at images of disability from the perspective of the disabled:

In books, it seemed, the only way a woman could be fulfilled was through the love of a man; and the only women worthy of that love were lithe and lovely, unblemished, physically perfect. The smallest flaw--an uneven gait, a malformed hand, a squint--was enough to disqualify a woman from romance, from all hope for happiness. (90)

From Kent's viewpoint, the role of heroine should be extended to include those who are not physically perfect. If one takes the feminist position that women can find fulfillment in their lives in ways other than those provided traditional roles, then physical deformity can serve to protect a woman from romance rather than to exclude her. As a challenge to the forces, especially

¹⁰ In another feminist variation on Bakhtin, Patricia Yaeger, in the same panel discussion on the grotesque, argued that the grotesque body behaves like a semiotic switchboard in the literary text, switching background to foreground.

strong at the turn of the century, that were demanding sexual normality by characterizing variances in sexual activity and desire as pathological (the beginnings of what has come to be known as the “heterosexual imperative”), deformity offered an escape from the marriage plot that had dominated the novel since its inception. As Rachel M. Brownstein has written in Becoming a Heroine (1982): “The marriage plot most novels depend on is about finding validation of one’s uniqueness and importance by being singled out among all other women by a man. The man’s love is proof of the girl’s value, and payment for it” (xv).

The figure of deformity sometimes aspires to a “heroinism” she can never attain but she more frequently functions in the narrative as a way of avoiding or confronting a social structure in which physical beauty and conformity to gender roles and behavior are demanded of “normal” women in order to make them desirable for marriage. Physical deformity places these characters completely outside the margins of the heterosexual economy and thereby allow for a variant perspective on gender and sexuality. In most of the works examined in this study, the protagonist is depicted as physically normal and therefore convention leads us to expect that she will assume the normal feminine role by seeking a husband and marrying. Deformed characters, as mirrors or doubles for the apparently more normal protagonist, serve to oppose a literary tradition that would make the protagonist a conventional heroine. Viewed in this way, to be deformed is to be defiant--to resist the forces that compel the individual to fit the norm. It is to metaphorically refuse to lay down on the procrustean bed.

Final Thoughts

When I applied the discovery of the monsters of Millenium Hall to the literature of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century America, I began the process of reading, understanding, and writing which is reflected in the current study. I also learned something about being a human being who finds herself, for any reason, outside the boundaries of what society has defined as normal. There is a price to be paid for bearing the stigma of deviance whether it is forced on us by the realities of our existence or assumed voluntarily in order to fulfill our desires, professional and personal, as artists and as individuals. No matter how successful we might be in defying the

prescriptive forces of society, we cannot help but feel, on some level, the marks of our differences. Whether we want to or not, we are all bound to a procrustean bed that measures normality and demands that we alter ourselves to fit standards we did not create. I have chosen to focus on the narrative works of a group of American women who wrote during the latter part of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century because I feel a strong connection between their lives and works, and my own a century later. I hope that is true for others as well. More specifically, I hope this project offers some insight into the reasons and the ways many women and men, especially those who are lesbian and gay, must struggle with feelings of deformity that stem from a perception of deviance as they struggle to break out of conventional categories of gender, sexuality, class, and race. The following words by the lesbian writer Dorothy Allison from an essay in Skin: Talking About Sex, Class and Literature (1994) express feelings that are astoundingly similar to those expressed by the writers featured in this study who lived a century and more ago, proving that figures of deformity and deviance are still with us, and reminding us that the act of writing is an act of both confronting fears and healing wounds:

Every time I sit down to write, I have a great fear that anything I write will reveal me as the monster I was always told I would be, but that fear is personal, something I must face in everything I do, every act I contemplate. It is the whisper of death and denial. Writing is an act that claims courage and meaning, and turns back denial, breaks open fear, and heals me as it makes possible some measure of healing for all those like me. (180-1)

1. Art, Madness, and Sexuality: Harriet Prescott Spofford

In December, 1872, a fictional monologue with the simple title, "Her Story," was published in Lippincott's Magazine. The author was Harriet Prescott Spofford, considered by many to be one of the finest as well as most popular writers of her day. The unnamed narrator tells her story from within an asylum for the insane where she has been imprisoned for ten years. She speaks to a silent visitor whose name is Elizabeth. With its universalizing title, "Her Story" promises to be more than the unique history of a particular character. As a narrative about sexual passion gone awry and artistic creativity perverted to gratify the desires of the body rather than the spirit, it provides an apt paradigm with which to begin this study.

Near the end of the narrative, after the speaker has recounted to her visitor the sequence of events which had brought about her insanity and confinement, she briefly describes another woman who has recently been admitted into the asylum:

She is a little woman, swarthy as a Malay, but her hair, that grows as rapidly as fungus grows in the night, is whiter than leprosy: her eyebrows are so long and white that they veil and blanch her dark dim eyes; and she has no front teeth. A stone from a falling spire struck her from her horse, they say. The blow battered her and beat out reason and beauty. Her mind is dead: she remembers nothing, knows nothing; but she follows me about like a dog: she seems to want to do something for me, to propitiate me. All she ever says is to beg me to do her no harm. She will not go to sleep without my hand in hers. Sometimes, after long effort, I think there is a gleam of intelligence, but the doctor says there was once too much intelligence, and her case is hopeless. (148)

It is odd, to say the least, to be casually confronted on the last page of a text with a character that carries such a strong emotional impact and yet that appears to have played no role in the story itself. What is this hideously

disfigured freak of a woman doing there? It is easy enough to account for her as a rather unskillful last-minute gothic touch--a sensational addition to insure a final shiver on the part of the reader--but such a reading, even if true on one level, is ultimately unsatisfying, for it fails to get to the bottom of the question. I want to argue, instead, that even though she appears to be relegated to the margins of the plot, this diminutive, dark, deformed woman, whose "mind is dead" and whose "case is hopeless," stands at the story's emotional center and is, in fact, the "her" of the story's title. I make this argument by showing that she serves as a grotesque, deformed doppelganger for the story's narrator and that by functioning as a reflection of the narrator, she figures as a symbol for the author's vision of the state of being that is the inevitable lot of passionate and creative women in a culture which demands sexual repression and conformity to gender-appropriate roles. Moreover, I suggest that "Her Story" is not unique in its introduction of a grotesque, deformed character to represent a projection of emotionally and culturally deviant aspects of an apparently "normal" protagonist, and that similar "figures of deformity" appear in the works of other American women writing fiction at the end of the nineteenth century. Across genres and styles, in novels as well as short stories, in romantic fantasy, proletarian realism, and local color, characters appear, most often in minor roles, whose physical deformities are the stigmata that mark them as deviant and whose function is to give physical form to transgressions that are unspeakable. In the analyses that follow, I focus my attention on marginal areas of the text characterized by prose that is supercharged with meaning, using language that is more intense than the story line would justify. In doing so, I am deviating from the usual practice of reading a story's meaning primarily through an analysis of its plot and primary characters. Indeed, previous literary critics who have read in this way have ignored the very figures in which, as I argue, meaning is situated.

Before entering this specific narrative, I want to place it in context with some background about its author. Harriet Prescott Spofford lived from 1835 until 1921.¹¹ She was born and spent her early childhood in Calais, Maine, a

¹¹ Throughout this chapter, I refer to the author by her married name, Harriet Prescott Spofford. Although she published her earliest works under her maiden name, Prescott, she used her full married name consistently once she married at the age of thirty and it is by this name that she is best known.

remote and primitive community located on the Bay of Fundy, on the United States side of the Canadian border, where her mother had been born. Her father, a native of Massachusetts, had come to the north to work as a lumber merchant. According to her friend and fellow writer, Rose Terry Cooke, Spofford's "childish plays were full of daring," as she rode the logs on the river, made rafts, and played with the planks at the sawmill. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Spofford grew up as a tomboy with a "sound mind in a sound body" (526-27).¹² However, this rough frontier life came to an end when Spofford was in her early teens. The financial opportunities in Calais turned out to be extremely poor for her father, a man described by Cooke as a "brilliant, tender-hearted, and prodigally generous man, courteous and genial" (522). At first he tried to turn from the failing lumber industry to law, but he was unsuccessful and eventually the family was forced to separate. Hal or Hallie, as she was called by the family, probably left in early 1849, when she was thirteen, to live with her paternal grandmother and aunt in Newburyport, Massachusetts, outside Boston, where the Prescotts, her father's side of the family, had originated. Within a year, her mother and her younger siblings joined them. Her father went out to Oregon to seek his fortune and settled in Oregon City.

Despite the family's economic difficulties, Hallie received an unusually solid and rigorous education. Her first school was the progressive Putnam Free School near Newburyport, where she devoted herself to the study of astronomy, botany, and literature, and where, according to Cooke, she first began writing essays and poetry. At Putnam, she came to the attention of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a man who encouraged a number of young women writers, when she was awarded a first prize for her essay on Hamlet's

¹² Cooke's biography of Spofford appears in a collection entitled Our Famous Women: an authorized record of their lives and deeds, published in 1884. While Cooke wrote about Spofford and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Spofford contributed biographies of Cooke, Clara Louise Kellogg, Louise Chandler Moulton, and Mary L. Booth. According to Spofford, who often referred inquirers about her life to this article, Cooke got most of her material from one of her aunts. The other principle source of information about Spofford is a dissertation, Harriet Prescott Spofford by Elizabeth K. Halbeisen, published by the University of Pennsylvania in 1935. Spofford published her own memoir, A Little Book of Friends, in 1916, in which she recounts her relationships with contemporary women writers and artists.

madness in a competition he sponsored.¹³ She began to regularly attend a poetry group led by Higginson and helped teach evening classes for working people which he conducted (Halbeisen 40). When she was eighteen, she moved with her mother and younger siblings to Derry, New Hampshire. There she and her younger sister, Mary, attended Pinkerton Academy, a liberal arts school with a reputation for academic excellence, which became coeducational the year they entered.¹⁴ She was a student there for two academic years and continued to develop her writing skills.

Spofford's formal education came to an end when she was twenty as financial pressures on the family intensified, and she was forced to support her invalid mother and her younger brothers and sisters. The family returned to Newburyport and Hallie took up writing as a career. At first she earned money by writing sensationalist fiction for the Boston "story papers," turning out hundreds of stories during her first few years and often working fifteen hours a day. However, despite this pressure to produce easily salable pieces, Spofford had higher artistic aspirations and in 1859, when she was twenty-three, she submitted a more ambitious work, titled "In A Cellar," to the Atlantic Monthly. When he received this sophisticated and slightly naughty work, the editor, James Russell Lowell, withheld publication for several months, thinking it was a fraudulent translation of a French author. According to Fred Lewis Pattee, "the apparent familiarity of its author with European life, her jaunty quotations and allusions, and, more than all else, her Gallicism in atmosphere and style, seemed to mark her unmistakably as an exotic" (159). It took the testimony of Thomas Higginson to convince Lowell that the story had indeed been written by a twenty-two year old American girl. Once it was published, "In A Cellar" was widely praised, and Spofford's career as a serious writer was launched.

¹³ Van Wyck Brooks wrote in New England: Indian Summer (1940) that "one of Higginson's hobbies was discovering talent" (133). In addition to Spofford, he has been credited with encouraging Celia Thaxter, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Rose Terry Cooke, Helen Hunt Jackson, and, of course, Emily Dickinson.

¹⁴ Although the Pinkerton Academy originally had been founded as a coeducational school, women were not admitted between 1821 and 1853, the year Harriet and her younger sister, Mary, entered.

This career was, in itself, a cultural phenomenon that might not have been possible a generation earlier. As Mary Kelley demonstrated in Private Woman, Public Stage (1984), earlier American women writers, such as Fanny Fern, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Catharine Maria Sedgewick, and Susan Warner were neither measured, nor measured themselves, against the aesthetic standards set by the male literary establishment. This earlier generation wrote primarily for financial survival and were unable to conceptualize themselves as serious artists. As women who still believed that their most important role was to be in the home, providing comfort and spiritual guidance to their husbands and children, they were made uncomfortable by being thrust into the public sphere as writers. By the Civil War, however, a new generation of women writers, among them, Harriet Spofford, began to view themselves as serious artists and to aspire for cultural recognition. Armed with the feminist ideology that had emerged from the abolitionist movement, and supported by a rapidly changing society that provided a host of new opportunities for women, these writers were able to lay claim to a cultural territory that had previously belonged exclusively to men.

By the time Spofford was in her mid-twenties, she was widely considered to be among the most promising writers of her day. Spofford herself later attributed her success in large measure to the existence of the Atlantic Monthly as a vehicle for the publication of quality fiction by American writers that was receptive to the work of women. She also acknowledged the influence of two other women writers. The first was Rose Terry Cooke, a writer only eight years older than Spofford, who eventually became one of her closest friends. As a young writer herself, Cooke had been given the lead position in the 1857 inaugural issue of the Atlantic. In her essay in Our Famous Women on her friend, Spofford wrote that through this personal achievement Cooke "kindled the ambition and had the felicitation of every other young woman who turned the pages throughout the country,--for most of us felt as if all girlhood were honored in her who carried her light before men with such proud strength and beauty" (175). The second was Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of Uncle Tom's Cabin, who was the most successful and most influential woman writer of the previous generation. In 1859, the year her first story appeared, Spofford had the awesome experience

of being a guest at a dinner given by the Atlantic for Stowe, now forty-eight, who was going off to Europe. The other guests included such venerable literary figures as Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and John Greenleaf Whittier. Spofford was the only other woman present, besides Stowe herself. One can only imagine what it must have been like for the young author to find herself in the company of a group of men, and the one woman who was the guest of honor, who were both much more famous and much older than herself. Thomas Higginson, who was responsible for bringing her to the dinner, wrote to his mother "all about my inducting little Harriet Prescott into that high company" (Halbeisen 55).

In 1863, when she was twenty-eight, The Amber Gods and Other Stories was published and Spofford had become a writer to pay attention to. No less a critic than the young Henry James, who had not yet published any of his own fiction, reviewed the collection for The North American Review. According to Pattee, it was very unusual for the Review to bother with "a collection of mere tales," let alone one among "the mass of current feminine fiction." It did so, James wrote, on the grounds that "a writer who has at once achieved so large a popularity as Miss Prescott has already won can never be a matter of indifference to anyone who is interested in the growth of American literature." Despite the flattery implicit in being reviewed, James was not wholly positive, criticizing Spofford's stories on moral grounds, complaining that "a low, murky atmosphere too often hangs over them; and almost without exception they have a morbid and unhealthful tone." With its emphasis on "illicit love" and its "constant contemplation of a diseased side of human nature," the collection "can scarcely fail to produce an unhealthy state of mind and thus to exert a dangerous influence." He goes on to chide that "a writer, whose stories are so eagerly read as are those of Miss Prescott, ought not to be unmindful of the influence which she may exert on the young" (Pattee 162).

But if, according to Henry James, this young woman writer was not writing like a young lady should, other readers, especially other women writers, had a different response. In a note to her sister-in-law, Sue, Emily Dickinson wrote of the 1860 story, "Circumstance," "Sue, it is the only thing

that I ever read in my life that I didn't think I could have imagined myself!" and asked her to "send me everything she writes" (Halbeisen 80).¹⁵ Another of Spofford's slightly younger contemporaries, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, who was to become a well-known writer and a friend of Spofford's in her later years, recounted in an essay written in 1910 called "Stories That Stay" that "The Amber Gods" "took a grip upon something deeper than taste or imagination in me" and she could never forget the "alien chill" that ran through her when she read the final sentence (Bendixon, x).

Despite Spofford's high artistic aspirations, she did not have the privilege of writing only for critical acclaim. In 1857, her father returned from Oregon but although he had found success as a civic leader, serving four times as Mayor of Oregon City, his finances had not improved and he returned to his family an impoverished invalid who only added to the burden on his oldest daughter. Spofford continued to be the primary support of her younger brother and sisters as well as both her parents.

This intense financial pressure was finally alleviated in 1865 when, after a very long engagement, Harriet Prescott married Richard Spofford, a lawyer and politician. During the early years of their marriage, the couple spent their time in both Newburyport and Washington D.C., where Richard Spofford conducted legal and political business, and where his new wife developed a social life and continued to write for publication. In 1874, their economic situation having improved, they purchased Deer Island, a small island of five acres with an old inn located on the Merrimack River. At Deer Island they were able to entertain guests as well as provide a home for numerous relatives on both sides of the family, including a sister, Mary N. Prescott, who also wrote for the magazines.¹⁶ As they both became successful,

¹⁵ Dickinson acknowledged admiration for very few contemporary American writers. According to Van Wyck Brooks, much of Dickinson's characteristic language echoes Spofford's exotic style (n. 156-57). David Reynolds makes a similar suggestion in Beneath the American Renaissance (1988) (423-24).

¹⁶ Others family members who lived with Spofford were both her parents until their deaths in 1881 and 1883; her brother, Otis, who worked as a lawyer; and Richard's mother and his sister, Fanny. Other relatives and friends visited for varying periods of time, especially during the summers.

money finally ceased to be a problem. Servants took care of the housework and Harriet Spofford was able to continue to write prolifically.

By all available accounts, including her own letters and the observations of her friends, Harriet Spofford was deeply in love with her husband and the marriage, which lasted until his death in 1888, appears to have been a happy one. The one noticable dark note was the death of their only child, a son who had been born a little over a year after their marriage, at the age of just nine months, a loss that caused Spofford a deep and lasting sadness. However, her writing continued to flourish after her marriage. Richard supported her career, provided emotional and financial stability, was a source of inspiration to her, and was a critical reader of her manuscripts (Halbeisen 103). On the occasions when they were separated, letters were written at least daily, and often more frequently. Even after many years of marriage, these letters express a passion that is rare at any age. For example, on February 3, 1885, when Spofford was forty-nine, she wrote:

My dear Dick, I miss you more than I can express,--I feel as if we sh'd never have such a happy time again as we did these last weeks together, at least as I did. . . . You are all the world to me, my darling, & I pray every night that I may die when you do, & you may die when I do, so that neither may be left without the other, & if there is a place to go to that we may go together.

The next day, she continues:

. . . it seems as tho' I wanted nothing but you, & you meet every need in my nature, & having you I had everything. I think if I were cast away with you alone on an island in mid-sea, my only fear w'd be that I sh'd see a sail. I don't suppose all that is exactly right, & so shall not complain if I am not as much to you. Probably it is neither right nor natural. But you are all I want in this world or the next. (Halbeisen 118)

The only disturbing note in these letters is Spofford's expression of a fear that her love for her husband may have been excessive, not quite "right" or "natural." In a sense, Spofford was caught between two sets of cultural

standards, neither of which suited her own temperament. The traditional "Victorian" view was that while proper women were expected to find their complete fulfillment in marriage and motherhood, they were not considered capable of feeling physical passion. On the other hand, many professional women during the late nineteenth century, in reaction to this rigid concept of true womanhood, were choosing to live without men, either as single women or by forming same sex couples. Such women, many of whom were among Spofford's closest friends, may have questioned her single-minded devotion to a man.

Given these opposing attitudes, it is no wonder that Rose Terry Cooke felt the need to defend Spofford's domestic accomplishments in her biographical sketch, citing her as a model to prove wrong the contemporary view that literature and marriage cannot be successfully undertaken at the same time:

. . . so much is said about the incapacity of literary women for domestic life, so many sneers are hurled at them as a class, that it is certainly a duty owed to them to record the truth that Mrs. Spofford is as devoted a wife, sister, and friend as the most uncultured of her sex could be, and withal a careful and intelligent housekeeper. (533)

Spofford, for her part, in the same volume, notes the success of her friend Cooke's late marriage at forty-six and comments on what she considers the unfortunate absence of marriage in the life of another of her subjects, the opera singer, Clara Louise Kellogg. Expressing her belief that far from hindering art and creativity, marriage enhances them, she writes: "I will confess that I have thought a strong and tender passion, an experience of that great school of life to be found in marriage, would enrich, deepen, and fortify her [Kellogg's] genius and her art" (384).

Despite Spofford's prayer that she not outlive her husband, he died only three years later, in 1888, while she was to live another thirty-three years. However, Spofford had developed a number of sources of rich emotional support that sustained her throughout her life. In addition to her intimate relationship with her husband, she maintained warm relationships with

members of her own family and Richard's. After Richard's death, her niece, Katherine Prescott Mosely, was her constant companion until Spofford's own death in 1921.¹⁷ Although she is described by Cooke as a quiet and shy woman who preferred to be on her island with her family to socializing in town, Spofford enjoyed close friendships with a circle of talented women writers, artists, and musicians, especially during her later years, and it can be said that to one degree or another, she was in touch with most of the important writers of her day. Many of these relationships are described in her memoir, A Little Book of Friends, published in 1916. Prominent among her friends were Annie Fields, widow of her first publisher, James T. Fields, and her companion, Sarah Orne Jewett, one of the most talented woman writers of the late nineteenth century. Fields and Jewett were one of the most well-known couples of literary Boston and held a secure place at the center of a circle of other talented women of their own as well as younger generations (including Willa Cather). Spofford's close and long-lasting friendship with her once role model, Rose Terry Cooke, has already been mentioned. Also among her closest and oldest friends were Louise Chandler Moulton, a well-known writer and hostess of an active Boston salon; and Mary Louise Booth, editor of Harper's Bazar, and her companion, Annie Wright.¹⁸ In addition to those already mentioned, Spofford wrote about her friendships with Celia Thaxter, a Maine poet; Anne Whitney, a prominent sculptor, and her companion, Adeline Manning; and the writer, Gail Hamilton (Mary Abigail Dodge). It is also worth noting that Spofford maintained a friendship with Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, another writer included in the present study. In short, throughout her life, and especially during her latter years, she enjoyed

¹⁷ Katherine Mosley was the daughter of Spofford's sister Katherine. Both mother and daughter had regularly spent their summers at Deer Island. Katherine was so close to her aunt that she "was really almost H.P.S.' child," according to one of Spofford's closest friends (Halbeisen 207). Spofford willed the island to Katherine who continued to live there alone after the death of Otis Prescott, writing occasional plays, until her own death in 1930.

¹⁸ Spofford wrote biographies of Moulton and Booth for Our Famous Women and well as her own memoirs. Moulton, who has been virtually forgotten today, was one of the most popular and well-liked women of her time. Booth was editor of Harper's Bazar, from its inception in 1867 until her death in 1889. She was a major supporter of Spofford, who was a regular contributor from 1868 on, publishing at least seventy-four stories there between 1868 and 1890 alone. In addition to supporting Spofford, Booth can be credited with discovering Mary E. Wilkins (Freeman), whose first story she published after it had been rejected by the Atlantic.

a number of close friendships with women who were her intellectual and social peers, and who respected and supported her aspirations and accomplishments as a writer. In many ways, despite the financial pressures that fell upon her when she was still barely a girl, the early painful loss of her only child, and the untimely death of her husband, Spofford was more fortunate in her professional life than many of her contemporaries. Receiving recognition as a serious writer from an early age, she lived within a nurturing family and a hospitable cultural environment that enabled her to write throughout her life.

Spofford published well into the twentieth century, her career spanning the period from before the Civil War until after the beginning of the First World War. It is generally agreed, however, that most of her best work was written in the 1860's and 1870's when she was at the height of her reputation. She wrote in a number of genres, including the novel, essay, biography, and autobiography, but she was best known for her short stories, of which two hundred and seventy five have been identified by Halbeisen.

The most successful of her works are marked by an air of sophistication, mystery, passion, and decadence that seemed to find its principle source in Edgar Allen Poe, to whom she was often compared, even in her own time. Pattee, who considered Poe to have been one of the great innovators in American literature, especially in respect to the short story, considered Spofford to have been one of only two writers in the decade following Poe's death to carry on his tradition. In his important work, The Development of the American Short Story (1923), Pattee places Spofford immediately after Poe and in opposition to other writers of her times, especially women. He writes: "Amid all this feminism and uncertainty [a reference to the popular romance that flourished during the 1850's] one or two writers did really new and virile work" (155). One of the two was Harriet Spofford about whom he comments: "From the first she was a romancer, extreme in her romance. She worked with care and steadily she grew in power--not, however, in constructive power. In plot always was she weak" (161). Spofford's contribution, according to Pattee, was to introduce "something new and dangerous--the sex motif pressed beyond the limit its generation deemed safe . . . It was the beginning of a new element in the

American short story, one that in time was to play an important part" (162). Because of this contribution, Pattee placed her among "those few who, when the short story was still plastic, added a single touch toward the final shaping of the form and then were seen no more" (163). Today, having a longer perspective from which to view the nineteenth century, Spofford has been identified as "the major female practitioner of a mode of symbolic romance which many have asserted to be the mainstream of American fiction" (Bendixon xxii). Some of her most powerful stories are written as first-person monologues whose dramatic juxtapositions and non-linear structures mark them as not only in the tradition of Poe but related as well to the dramatic monologue of her near contemporary, Robert Browning.¹⁹

The supercharged, exotic romanticism that characterized Spofford's works, especially those written during the 1860's and 1870's, set her apart from other serious women writers of her time, many of whom were breaking away from the popular sentimental tradition by developing a new form of narrative characterized by regionalism and harsh realism. Spofford, on the other hand, with her sometimes "fanciful, airy style . . . full of aesthetic feeling . . . and high-flown phrases and recklessly chosen exotic words," as Van Wyck Brooks put it, seemed to be creating "protests against the bare, the cold, the rigid" (156). Yet, she refused to be limited by either the constraints of realism or of sentimental romantic fiction. Unlike her peers, she turned away from the realities of New England life and the actualities of her own life, as well as from the conventions of popular culture, towards an European and Oriental exoticism that better reflected her internal experiences and emotions.

A clue to her own approach to writing is seen in the following, which she wrote about Charlotte Bronte, another writer she greatly admired, in a biographical and critical introduction to a 1901 American edition of Jane Eyre:²⁰

¹⁹ Spofford's familiarity with and admiration for Browning are reflected in references to his works in a number of her stories, including "The Amber Gods."

²⁰ Jane Eyre was originally published in 1847, twelve years before Spofford published her first Atlantic story.

. . . genius does not require experience . . . its intuitions master facts and compass and surpass their experience. This woman of pure and fiery genius needed no personal familiarity with any emotion in order to depict it perfectly; the wings of her imagination took her into the heart of things at a word. (xix)

Yet, lack of personal experience for either writer does not mean that the self is absent, and it seems as true of Spofford as she thought it true of Bronte that "in writing in the autobiographical form it seemed impossible to Charlotte not to project her own personality, in some degree, into that of the heroine."

We sense Spofford's kinship with Bronte in the following passage from Cooke's biography, in which she describes her friend's personality as well as the qualities of her writing that stood out for her contemporaries:

Under her quiet aspect, wistful regard, and shy manner, lay a soul full of imagination and passion, and a nature that revelled in the use of words to express this fire and force. In her hands, the English language became sonorous, gorgeous, and burning. She poured out such luxury of image, such abundant and splendid epithet, such derivative stress, and such lavish color and life, that the stiff old mother-tongue seemed to have been molten and fused in some magic crucible, and turned to liquid gold and gems. (531)

Cooke, who was herself one of the primary exponents of the move toward realism in American literature, borrowed the image of "liquid gold and gems" from an story which confirmed Spofford's genius in the minds of her contemporaries, and which remains one of her most popular.²¹ "The Amber Gods" was published in the Atlantic Monthly in January and February of 1860 when Spofford was only twenty-five and has come to typify her contribution to the romantic short story. A number of writers and critics, including Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, William Dean Howells, and Arthur

²¹ The other outstanding story that has survived to once again be anthologized is "Circumstance," which also appeared in the Atlantic in 1860, a story set in Maine of a woman trapped in a tree by a panther, who sings to pacify him and save her own life.

Hobson Quinn have ranked "The Amber Gods" among the best short stories ever written. Even allowing for the decline in Spofford's reputation that has occurred with the passage of time, the story is still a powerful one. Like "Her Story," to which I will return shortly, its plot is structured around a triangle consisting of a "good" woman, a "bad" woman, and the man for whom they are competing. But each of the stories goes beyond its conventional plot by introducing a grotesquely deformed minor character who represents the deviance of women who rebel against the constraints imposed by a rigid and puritanical society. It is in this figure that we find the clues to the meaning of Spofford's text.

"The Amber Gods" is a long story in two parts. Its form is a first-person dramatic monologue, spoken by a young, unconventional woman, Giorgione Willoughby, or Yone, as she is called, to an unnamed, undefined listener, with whom the reader identifies. The style, suggestive of Browning, is rambling and non-linear, in keeping with the state of mind of the speaker.²² The story's plot concerns Yone's seduction, conquest, and eventual loss of a young artist, Vaughn Rose, who originally had been betrothed to her orphaned cousin, Louise, and who, in the end, returns to her. As the story opens, Rose, who had been a playmate of the two women when they were girls, has returned from a year abroad with the intention of marrying Louise.²³ He is obviously disturbed, however, when he encounters, for the first time since they were children, the self-consciously sensual and seductive Yone. For reasons that appear to have more to do with her own narcissism than with love, Yone encourages Rose's fascination with her by becoming increasingly seductive, while Louise, conditioned in the ways of the ideal nineteenth-century American woman, remains modestly and passively on

²² A specific allusion to Browning is made in "The Amber Gods" at a critical moment in the story when Rose reads from "Pippa Passes" just before he finally kisses Yone, acknowledging his love.

²³ Spofford teasingly plays with convention by using names that obscure gender: Yone, Lu, and Rose. Indeed, it is the male hero in this story who carries the most feminine name, for Vaughn Rose is always referred to by his family, not his given, name. Yone's full name, Giorgione, on the other hand, is actually a masculine name, taken from the painter, Giorgione da Castelfranco, who is included in Vasari's Lives of the Artists.

the sidelines. Rose soon succumbs to Yone's aggressive sexuality and at the end of the first part, subtitled "Flower o' the Peach," he marries her.

The second part of the story, subtitled, "Astra Castra, Numen Lumen," takes place ten years later.²⁴ As we might have predicted, given the conventions of nineteenth-century fiction, Rose has discovered that his fascination with Yone was only a fleeting passion based on base sensuality and that his heart really belongs to the pure and angelic Louise. But by this time, Yone has invested her identity in her passion for Rose and has sworn that she cannot live without him. Perceiving that she is losing her hold on him, she has no choice but to become fatally ill. Nursed by the still faithful Louise, Yone finally dies, still narrating the story, and we watch, along with her ghost, as Rose and Louise reunite over her deathbed.

Read only through the plot, "The Amber Gods" might appear to be a sentimentalized romance about the punishment that follows female aggression and pride, and the reward that accompanies feminine passivity and modesty. In this context, the story would appear to advocate conformity to social mores, specifically the rigid constraints placed on women in a sexually repressive society. The question is whether this reading does justice to the story. Henry James, who found the story immoral, did not think so. Certainly, it is true that Spofford, trained by her experience as a writer for the "story papers," relied upon the conventions of popular literature to get and hold the attention of her audience, but she appropriated these conventions only to challenge the very same restrictions she appeared to be supporting. Following convention, she developed main characters who embodied qualities that were broadly representative of specific sexual and gender-based types. Consequently, when "The Amber Gods" is viewed primarily from the

²⁴ The significance of the second subtitle is unclear. Roughly translated, it would appear to mean "cut star, divine light," suggesting, perhaps, the light that is emitted from a gemstone. There are, however, other possible translations: *astra*=star or hearth; *castra*=castrated or effeminate or camp; *lumen*=light or opening; *numen*=divinity or divine will. Bendixon, in his note to "The Amber Gods," acknowledges that the significance of the subtitle "remains puzzling." He offers Barton Levi St. Armand's translation, "cut star, numinous light," and his own "the star is cut, the power is the light," and postulates that the phrase "appears to be a medieval motto that points to some kind of fading or blocked light" (n. 6, 219). He notes that Higginson had used "Astra Castra" and "Numen Lumen" as titles for two of Dickinson's poems and suggests that the phrases may have had a clearer meaning for nineteenth-century readers.

perspective of its plot, its characters seem to divide into conventional stereotypes, with Yone and Lu representing, in turn, the extremes of whore and virgin, bad and good, sensuous and ethereal, dark and light. However, reading beyond plot and characterization, we find that Spofford recast these popular types and altered their moral significance. Using a language that is richly evocative, and introducing details that function symbolically rather than narratively, "The Amber Gods" transcends its popular sources to expose and examine some of the most powerful conflicts that were emerging for non-conforming women and especially for women artists during the later half of the nineteenth century.

The most important character in the story is the narrator, Yone, in whom Spofford created a heroine who is everything a woman is not supposed to be. In the words of Alfred Bendixon, she is a "shocking challenge to the values of nineteenth century America" (xxiii). He goes on:

The completely self-centered Yone lacks any moral sense, any real capacity to sympathize with or even comprehend the suffering of others. She is vain and selfish, sensual and seductive, devious and even demonic. Her long monologues provide a curious blend of childlike egotism, pagan vitality, and amoral erotism--qualities Spofford captures through a prose style so luxuriant that it sometimes threatens the boundaries of language itself. In fashioning the perversely fascinating Yone Willoughby, Spofford has given voice to a woman that her own culture would have labeled "unspeakable." (xxiv)

Heading the list of the unspeakable things that Yone represents is an awareness of her body and, more particularly, of her sexuality. Bendixon writes that

Yone affirms a sensuous enjoyment of the physical world and of the human body. . . . In her erotic self-absorption, Yone poses a defiant challenge to a culture that feared the body and often tried to relegate women to a spiritual sphere. (xxv)

By creating a character whose sexuality is as blatant as Yone's, Spofford was explicitly defying a social code which demanded that women, especially unmarried young women (such as she was herself at this time), disembody themselves in order to remain completely innocent of anything that could be categorized as physically erotic. In place of the demure Victorian heroine for whom romantic love was a vague spiritual feeling, Spofford, through her counter-heroine, Yone, insisted upon recognizing the physical body as the source of romantic love and desire. Viewed from a conventional standpoint, a woman who experienced herself as sensual and whose behavior was sexually aggressive would have been viewed as existing outside the boundaries that defined respectable womanhood. Such a woman could not be a proper lady--she might be from the lower or criminal classes, she might belong to a racial minority that was relegated to subhuman status, or she might be seen as having masculine traits and thus as being sexually deviant, but she could not be a normal, white, middle-class American woman. Within such a world, Yone poses a serious problem of identity. On the surface, she is neither a criminal, nor a racial minority, nor a sexual deviant. Yet, not only does she fail to conform to the behavior mandated for her class, race, and gender but she resists being relegated to a stereotypical role of any sort by self-consciously casting herself as an amoral being, akin to a myth or a work of art, whose essence is grounded in natural passions and not in artificial social conventions.

In striking contrast to Yone is her virtuous cousin, Louise, who Bendixon describes as a girl who "exemplifies the conventional feminine values that New England cherished and Yone rejects with scorn; Lu is pure, kind, submissive, self-effacing, and self-sacrificing" (xxv). As an orphan, she is completely dependent on her (male) relations for financial support. Much to Yone's undisguised contempt, Lu epitomizes the kind of woman who serves as a spiritual helpmeet to men. Using the language of the sentimental romance, Yone contrasts herself with her cousin's conventional goodness, reveling as she does so in her own amorality: "Louise . . . made her beauty by growing a soul in her eyes, I suppose,--what you call good. I'm not good, of course; I wouldn't give a fig to be good" (39).

Caught between his love for Louise and his fascination with Yone is the artist, Vaughn Rose. By giving her male hero an effeminized surname, Rose, which is the only name by which he is known, Spofford creates what amounts to a verbal cross-dressing. Rose's unmasculine behavior is made explicit in the text when Yone confides to her listener about the ways she and Rose reverse normal expectations based on gender:

he's not one of those cliff-like men against whom you are blown as a feather. I don't fancy that kind; I can stand of myself, rule myself. . . . he's tall enough, but all his frame is delicate, held to earth by nothing but the cords of a strong will,--very little body, very much soul. . . . A stranger might have thought, when I spoke of those copals Rose carved, that Rose was some girl. But though he has a feminine sensibility, like Correggio or Schubert, nobody could call him womanish. (51)

True to his name, Rose confounds the usual expectations of a male hero. He is passive to an extreme, playing a role that one might associate with a muse rather than a lover, and his sole function in the story is to provide Yone with an object to which she can direct her narcissistic sexuality.

The plot of "The Amber Gods" is defined by the relationships between these three main characters. However, they do not determine the story's meaning, which is embodied in the figure of a tiny, deformed, and racially-marked female slave, and her string of amber beads shaped like tiny gods. These supercharged figures are described in language that can hardly be contained by the conventions of narrative prose and they take up a space in the story that is strikingly disproportionate to their actual importance in the unfolding of the plot. To account for their presence, Spofford provides a lengthy explanation that dominates the text, yet they are almost irrelevant to the actual story being told. The deformed slave and her amber gods fall so far outside the normal conventions by which fiction is read that most critics fail to mention them at all and no one has read them as crucial elements in the story.

The amber beads are first introduced in the very first sentences of Yone's narrative and she soon recounts, in a long and elaborate digression that comes a little later in the story, how they came into her possession. Yone's great-grandfather Willoughby was a sea-captain who traded in slaves. In his youth, he came home from one of his voyages bearing an unusual gift for his young bride: "a little islander, an Asian imp, six years old, and wilder than the wind," who brought with her a string of amber beads shaped like gods (43).²⁵ This untamed, foreign slave child introduced a shocking element of unrestrained violence and rage into the previously quiet, civilized, and undoubtedly repressed New England family. As Yone describes her:

She spoke no word of English, and was full of short shouts and screeches, like a thing of the woods. My great-grandmother couldn't do a bit with her; she turned the house topsy-turvey, cut the noses out of the old portraits, and chewed the jewels out of the settings, killed the little home animals, spoiled the dinners, pranced in the garden with Madam Willoughby's farthinggale, and royal brocades rustling yards behind,--this atom of a shrimp,--or balanced herself with her heels in the air over the curb of the well, scraped up the dead leaves under one corner of the house and fired them,--a favorite occupation,--and if you left her stirring a mess in the kitchen, you met her, perhaps, perched in the china-closet and mumbling all manner of demoniacal prayers, twisting and writhing and screaming over a string of amber gods that she had brought with her and always wore. One might as well have had a ball of fire in the house, or chain-lightning; every nice old custom had been invaded, the ancient quiet broken into a Bedlam of outlandish sounds, and as Captain Willoughby was returning, his wife packed the sprite off with him,--to cut, rip, and tear in New Holland, if she liked, but not in New England,--and rejoiced herself that she would find

²⁵ As an example of how the deformed slave has been ignored by critics, Arthur Hobson Quinn completely erases her, by mistakenly claiming that the beads were brought from Asia by the sea-captain.

that little brown skin cuddled up in her best down beds and among her lavendered sheets no more. (43-4)

Even though the otherwise refined Willoughby family derived its wealth from the brutality of the slave trade, it could not contend with the introduction of such a disruptive and savage force into the polite conventions of its social structure. Spofford, who once described herself as having been "an ardent antislavery person, and woman suffragette from my fourteenth year," may well have been commenting here on the hypocrisy of New Englanders who profited from the slave trade but were unwilling to face the reality of slavery (Bendixon xvii). To restore itself to its comfortable "ancient quiet," it expelled the wild slave child, shipping her out to sea, away from the society whose complacent order she had threatened. Yet even on the open sea, like an evil demon, she continued to cause such havoc that the ship foundered, destroying its captain, presumably Yone's grandfather, and his crew, while the cause of all the trouble was rescued and eventually turned up in Fiesole with a case of malaria. As a consequence of her struggles to survive, having been "shaken almost to death" by adversity, the once unmanageable slave child was transformed into "a mysterious tame servant, faithful, jealous, indefatigable." It would seem that she had learned her lesson: rebellion and the refusal to conform to conventional social expectations leads to rejection by society and even to death; it is better to repress, conform, and live. But Spofford makes it clear that the personal consequences of surrender to the forces of convention are severe, for when the spirit of the Asian imp was broken, she was almost magically transformed into a ancient dwarf--a servile plaything for the European aristocracy: "she never grew; at ninety she was of the height of a yardstick, --and nothing could have been finer than to have a dwarf in those old palaces, you know" (44).

The elaborate story of the imp continues. As an aged palace dwarf, she became the personal servant of a young Italian girl. One day, while traveling in Italy, Yone's father, who had grown up with stories of the wild little slave girl that had once disrupted his grandmother's house, caught a glimpse of a beautiful girl with an amber rosary accompanied by a tiny, old, demure, black slave, in a small church in Fiesole. After he returned home, he continued to be haunted by the girl, but despaired of how to find her. Returning to Europe

on a quest, he found her again in the same small church, identifying her by the amber rosary she held. The only obstacle to his passion was the old black dwarf who “became livid” when he spoke to the girl and “seemed always after haunted by a dreadful fear of him, pursued him with a rancorous hate, but could not hinder his marriage” (45). Unable to prevent this powerful white American male from taking possession of her charge, the dwarf enacted a kind of fairy tale revenge. After she gave birth to a daughter, the Italian girl died. Meanwhile, the amber beads passed like a magical charm or a curse, from the dwarf to the Italian girl’s sister and finally into the Willoughby house, where they were given to the now grown daughter who is, of course, our narrator, Yone.

As the story opens, Yone invites her listener to admire her amber and some old point lace. She is particularly fond of both, she confides, simply because “I like yellow things, you see” (37).²⁶ But the beads are more than pretty objects; Yone’s account of their history loads them with significance and ambiguity. Even as she toys with them, we cannot forget that they had previously served as the rosary of her dead mother and that they had been appropriated from exotic sources that Spofford’s contemporaries would have seen as heathen. Brought first to America and then to Europe by the little Asian slave, the amber had been “sculptured into hideous, tiny, heathen gods.” Yone, in pointing this out, draws our attention to one bead in particular: “a miniature woman, one hand grasping the round rock behind, while she looks down into some gulf, perhaps beneath, and will let herself fall. O, you should see her with a magnifying glass” (40). In a sense, this is precisely what Spofford accomplishes, as she focuses the reader’s attention on the figure of Yone as she plunges towards her own death.

As I have been suggesting, the amber beads and the Asian imp who is their true owner, are keys to the meaning of the text. They are what carry it beyond popular cliché into a bold defiance of convention. On the most obvious level, the amber beads play a role in the text that is blatantly talismanic. Like a magic ring or a glass slipper in a fairy tale, the rosary is the

²⁶ The significance of the color yellow is complex, carrying connotations that are racial and sexual. We will see it again in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” a story that follows in the tradition of Spofford and was probably influenced by her.

device that allows Yone's father, the "prince," to find his lost "princess." But in a move that shows Spofford's sophisticated understanding of the nature of symbols, the same amber beads, in the hands of Yone, evoke sexuality and chaos. When Yone first sees the beads she feels a sympathy with them and knows at once they are meant for her. The language applied to both the woman and the beads draws upon similar imagery: having described herself as a blonde, full of golden vitality, seeming even to herself to be "the complete incarnation of light, full, bounteous, overflowing" (38), she similarly describes the amber beads as "clots of sunshine" (40). Rose, however, has a different set of associations. Fearful of his own passions, he is equally repelled by the musty smell of the amber and Yone's threateningly aggressive sexuality. Using language more appropriate to an epic description of Hell than to an item of jewelry, Rose associates both the beads and the woman who wears them with "that furious epoch where rioted all monsters and poisons,--where death fecundated and life destroyed,--where superabundance demanded such existences, no souls, but fiercest animal fire" (56). Rose's response to the amber is so strong that he rejects even the chaste and guileless Lu when she is tricked into wearing the beads.

As the beads are linked with Yone, they also reinforce the connection between her and the Asian slave who initially introduced them into the repressed world of nineteenth century New England. This racially marked and physically deformed slave evokes a complex set of associations having to do with the consequences of oppression and repression, especially of those perceived as being both inferior to and different from white, middle-class Americans. In the course of Yone's monologue, she provides a series of "facts" about the Asian imp that establish her significance and locate her identities: she originates from an island near Asia; she has a skin color that is variously described as yellow and black; she became older without growing higher, transforming from a childish imp to an aged dwarf who stood no higher than a yardstick; and she had a temperament that began as uncontrollable savagery and ended as jealous devotion. The origins of the imp/dwarf, and the situations in which she is placed, link her both to American slaves of African origin and to non-Western exotics being exhibited in American freak shows. Moreover, the specific language used to describe her suggests that Spofford may have wanted to evoke a number of other

popular writers in order to expand the associations connected with her character. For example, the imp that so disruptively enters the Willoughby home bears a strong resemblance to Harriet Beecher Stowe's character, Topsy, in Uncle Tom's Cabin, published in 1852.²⁷ Spofford may have also had in mind the mutinous slave, Babo, in Melville's "Benito Cereno," published in 1856, as well as that author's earlier depictions of the "savage" residents of the South Pacific islands he visited as a sailor. But, even without these references, the figure of an enraged little slave child and an aged black servant would have been connected with southern slavery and the threat of civil war in the United States of 1860.

In addition, because of her exotic origins, the Asian imp would have been associated with the pygmy Bushmen, Hottentots, Aztecs, Zulus, and Fijians who were being discovered by adventurers and exhibited in American freak shows around this time. These non-Western peoples were presented by showmen like P. T. Barnum to an eager American public as exotics whose lives and behavior were dramatically and shockingly different from anything experienced or imagined by themselves. South Pacific islanders, especially Fijians, were presented to the public as blood-thirsty cannibals who engaged in horrifying atrocities that were described in chilling detail. As a model for the female Asian imp, Spofford also may have had in mind the exhibition in 1860 at Barnum's American Museum in New York of the first pygmy from Africa, a sixteen-year-old girl named Flora who stood only thirty-nine inches high.²⁸ The suggestion of a connection between the Asian imp and the "savages" of nineteenth century museums and freak shows also would have had sexual connotations for Spofford and her readers. During the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, Western scientists, as well as the more blatant showmen, felt they had a special right to expose and exploit the sexuality of the "savages" they studied and exhibited. Non-western women, in particular,

²⁷ Topsy is initially described as "heathenish" and "goblin-like." She would "hold a carnival of confusion" with the bedclothes and would say in explanation "I spects I's the wickedest critter in the world." In addition, Spofford echoes Stowe's character's name when she writes that the Asian imp turned the house "topsy-turvey."

²⁸ Robert Bogdan in Freak Show (1988) provides a useful history of the exhibition of "freaks" in America. According to him, "cannibals" from the South Pacific were exhibited in the United States as early as 1834 and continued to be a popular attraction well into the twentieth century.

were assumed to engage in unrestricted and unrestrained sexual activity outside the boundaries of Christian marriage, thereby deviating from the chastity that defined white, middle-class, Western women. Variant sexuality was understood to be not only the result of strange societal customs, but to be based on essential physical differences. Consequently, scientists studied the bodies of female "savages" as exotic examples of sexual difference, carefully measuring such things as the length and shape of the labia and clitoris of captured "native" women. Perhaps the most famous of these subjects was the Hottentot Venus who was exhibited in London and whose genitalia were put on public display even after her death.²⁹

These associations cannot be separated from the figure of the Asian imp. But more importantly, they cannot be separated from Yone herself, who Spofford links to the Asian slave in a number of ways. As I have already pointed out, on a symbolic level, both Yone and the slave are associated with the amber beads and the color yellow. Yone explicitly identifies herself with both the beads and their original owner when she explains to Vaughn Rose that "Little Asian--the imp of my name, you remember--owned them" (49). But Yone is marked in other ways as being racially different. Most obviously, she is, of course, half-Italian, an identity that some New Englanders would have seen as being racially mixed.³⁰ Her exotic side is given primacy through her given name which separates her from the world of her father, and associates her with her mother, for Giorgione, as she reminds us, was the name of a Florentine painter. In addition to her connection with Italy, both she and her father emphasize her exotic non-English side through allusions to other races. So, when Yone first introduces herself, she insists that she is more like the Egyptian goddess Isis than the Greek Diana or Pallas (38), and

²⁹ Genital descriptions and measurements for the "Hottentot female" and other African women are given in *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine* (1896) by American physicians George M. Gould and Walter L. Pyle, pp. 307-9. Sandor L. Gilman has written about the implications of the Hottentot Venus in "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature" (1985).

³⁰ Not only is there a persistent anti-Italian prejudice, as well as fascination, in the English tradition, but immigrant Italians were linked with other non-Western Europeans in late nineteenth-century America as they joined the Chinese, free Blacks, and other Eastern Europeans as cheap laborers in mills and factories.

later in the narrative, her father introduces her to Rose through references to other races associated with passionate temperaments, calling her "my great West Indian magnolia, my Cleopatra in light colors" (48).³¹ This connection with exotic sexuality may be even more blatantly suggested if Spofford intended that her narrator's baby name, Yone, evoke the Hindu "yoni," a word signifying the stylized representation of female genitals that symbolize the female principle in Hindu cosmology, and therefore a possible allusion to what was perceived as the unrestrained sexuality of Asian women.³²

By using an excess of super-charged imagery, Spofford insistently associates Yone with everything that is racially and culturally exotic: Italy, Roman Catholicism, the South Seas, the West Indies, Asia, Africa, paganism, cannibals and savages, and the institution of slavery. Moreover, all of Yone's associations with the exotic derive from her female heritage, in particular, her foreign-born mother and the female slave who had "belonged" to both her paternal grandmother and her mother. In other words, Spofford places Yone in a category that is outside the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, middle-class, nativist, patriarchy of the Willoughby men. Unlike her rival, the orphan Louise, who acknowledges her dependence on the generosity of the Willoughby men by conforming to their standard of feminine appearance and behavior, Yone insists on staying true to her nature--a nature that is defined as being female as opposed to feminine--even at the risk of self-destruction.

By developing a connection between the Asian slave and Yone, Spofford suggests that the enslavement, rage, defeat, and stunted growth that are experienced by those who are physically and racially marked are also characteristic of the lives of white American women from middle- and

³¹ During the nineteenth century, the term Egyptian was used to refer to anyone from the middle east, a geographic area that represented exoticism, sensuality, and sexual ambiguity. See Marjorie Garber's "The Chic of Araby" in *Body Guards* (1991).

³² I have no specific proof that Spofford was familiar with Hindu religion or language. I merely suggest that given the fascination with exotic cultures that flourished in late-nineteenth century America, and Spofford's own interest in the sensual and the exotic, it is not beyond possibility that she was familiar with the Hindu cosmology. Supporting this reading is that fact that the amber with which Yone is so closely associated was thought to have originated in India.

upper-class backgrounds. Admittedly, Yone is far from being a paragon of virtue, but that is just the point. By giving her narrator the point of view of a woman who defies everything that white middle-class America believed women should be, and by symbolically linking her with a deformed figure that represented everything white middle-class America feared and held in contempt, Spofford expresses her rejection of the role and character prescribed for women while simultaneously expressing her own fears about the consequences of that rejection. This set of correspondences between a protagonist who is apparently "normal" and a grotesque figure with whom she is symbolically linked is a pattern that is repeated in a variety of forms in other works by women writers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

We see it again in the 1872 work with which I began this chapter, "Her Story," which can be read against "The Amber Gods" as a narrative depicting a similar love triangle but told from the opposite perspective. The narrator of "Her Story" bears a remarkable similarity to Yone's cousin, Louise. She is a woman who attempts to conform to contemporary notions of true womanhood but who has lost her husband to an exotic rival whose amorality and narcissistic sexuality remind us of Yone. But in this story the punishment imposed by the patriarchy for failure to conform to its dictates falls as heavily on the virtuous narrator as on the transgressing seducer.

Like "The Amber Gods," "Her Story" is a dramatic monologue whose style reflects the mental and emotional state of its unnamed narrator who speaks from within an insane asylum where she has been confined for ten years. She is telling her story of courtship, marriage, and betrayal to a visiting woman friend with whom she went to school named Elizabeth. As a girl, she recounts, the narrator had been virtually alone in the world, an orphan completely dependent for her survival upon the generosity of her more affluent relatives. She recalls, in language that pretends to be spiritual but is unconsciously sexual, how she met her husband one day in church: "a voice filled my ear--a strange new voice, a deep sweet voice, that invited you and commanded you--a voice whose sound divided the core of my heart, and sent thrills that were half joy, half pain, coursing through me" (150). The source of this penetrating voice was the new rector, a man who was extraordinarily

beautiful, and whose love for the sensuous and the exotic violated the social norms of masculinity as surely as Yone's blatant sexuality had been an affront to the ideal of true womanhood. More Romanish than Protestant in his religious practices, his great love was music and, like the narrator, his first response was to her voice rather than to her person.

The courtship that followed was conducted with and through music--their passion was expressed through their singing as well as their bodies. In an explicit conflation of music and sexuality, the narrator recounts that on their wedding night, with her at the piano and him at the violin (appropriately named Amati), "together we improvised our own epithalamium" (153). Their marriage was a heaven on earth accompanied by the music of the spheres. Spencer (for the husband is the other named character along with Elizabeth), occupied himself in building a magnificent church while the narrator devoted herself to making him comfortable and raising their two babies--babies with voices like angels who sang even in their sleep. As Spencer worshipped God by adoring beauty, the narrator worshipped God by adoring her husband: "I saw God only through him. . . . I had no faith but Spencer's faith" (152).

But too soon, this idyllic paradise was invaded by a rival, Spencer's ward, an orphan like the narrator.³³ This unnamed woman was an exotic character, like Yone, whose sensuality and sexuality are described in such explicit detail that the story must have seemed shocking to many readers. At first, Spencer was drawn to his ward by her unusual (for a woman) intelligence and cleverness. However, as the young woman became increasingly seductive, Spencer began to withdraw from his wife even, it is explicitly suggested, ceasing to have sexual relations with her, and eventually he surrendered to his ward's erotic spell. As the sexual tension mounted, the narrator was driven nearly mad with jealousy and fear. Finally, she walked in on the two embracing as, appropriately, they were making music together. After an outburst of rage, expressed by pounding a dissonant chord on the piano keys, she woke in the asylum where we find her ten years later.

³³ The resemblance of this situation to the myth of the Garden of Eden, specifically the version in which the role of woman is split into the evil Lilith and the good Eve, is no doubt intentional.

Presumably, her husband remained at home with the children and his new lover to finish building his church.

Like "The Amber Gods," "Her Story" is grounded in the sentimental conventions of the popular narrative. Like other serious women writers of the nineteenth century, Spofford knowingly appropriated and altered those conventions for her own purposes, weaving her unconventional story within a traditional fabric. One of the ways Spofford manipulated convention was through her use of the first-person point of view, both to claim authority for and cast doubt on the reliability of the perceived realities of women.

Susan Snaider Lanser argues in Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice (1992) that the use of narrators who are self-consciously telling their own stories in what she calls the personal voice may be "less formidable for women than authorial voice, since an authorial narrator claims broad powers of knowledge and judgement, while a personal narrator claims only the validity of one person's right to interpret her experience." On the other hand, she notes, the personal voice carries certain dangers for the woman writer in that it "offers no gender-neutral mask or distancing 'third person,' no refuge in a generic voice that may pass as masculine. A female personal narrator risks the reader's resistance if the act of telling, the story she tells, or the self she constructs through telling it transgresses the limits of the acceptably feminine." In addition, the woman who writes in her own voice risks being labeled "immodest and narcissistic" (19).

Lanser's observations are useful in showing how conventions such as voice and point of view are related to gender. I would build on her ideas by suggesting that the personal voice, for all its possible limitations and weaknesses, had a particular usefulness for American women writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century. I want to suggest that rather than adopting the personal voice because it was less formidable and less authoritative, women writers such as Spofford found it a powerful way to insist upon their authority to tell their own stories.³⁴ Although her narrator

³⁴ As I earlier noted, Spofford's use of the dramatic monologue was probably derived from both Poe and Browning. I am not suggesting that American women writers had any monopoly on the form, only that it served their purposes particularly well

may lack the universalizing "authority" of the "authorial voice," the use of the personal voice allows her to have complete control over "her" own "story," for no other perceptions and points of view other than her own are allowed within the boundaries of the text. Moreover, Spofford controls the fictional audience just as tightly as she controls the narrator's point of view. It is clear from the first sentence that "Her Story" is a private conversation between two specific women: the narrator who has the only speaking voice and "Elizabeth," an old friend the narrator has known since her schooldays. Elizabeth, who has come to visit the narrator in the asylum where she has been imprisoned for ten years, silently listens to her story and tacitly agrees to be her advocate. As a result of the exclusivity of this narrative structure, the author, Harriet Spofford, is rendered virtually invisible and we, the readers, are placed outside the narrative structure so that we hear the telling of the story as if we were eavesdropping from a hidden place.³⁵

The purported reason the narrator tells "her story" to her visiting woman friend is to convince the friend that the speaker is in fact sane and therefore that she should be released to return home to her husband and children. If the reader accepts the truth of the narrator's story of love and betrayal, she would read "her story" simply as the story of the woman as victim. However, since the narrator takes action to control her life by telling her own story, "Her Story" also can be read as a narrative about the power of language, specifically language structured as narrative, to liberate women whose social voices have been silenced by men. The story itself--the words, syntax, and organization (or disorganization) of thought--is the only tool at the narrator's disposal by which she can attempt to effect her own release. But this implicit subtext relies on the accuracy and truthfulness of the speaker's story, and that is precisely what Spofford call into question.

Although the relationship of speaker to listener is presented as a simple and exclusive one, a number of details force us, as readers whose perspective goes beyond the narrative dyad, to question what is actually going on within the text. The most obvious of these is the apparent bewilderment

³⁵ This is, of course, always the case in fiction, except when the author addresses the reader directly. However, when a narrative consists of a story told by one person to another, the reader cannot help but be aware of her status as an outside spectator or listener.

of the narrator herself whose inability to figure out what has really happened problematizes the nature of truth from the outset. "Her Story" begins with the speaker in the middle of a thought, as if the reader had just tuned in to the story and picked up the conversation after it had begun. The reader's confusion is immediately established when the speaker refers to an "it" that has no referent. Sharing the reader's difficulty in figuring out what is what, the narrator's very first words expose her own inability to determine what is real and what is a product of her fantasy:

Wellnigh the worst of it all is the mystery.

If it were true, that accounts for my being here. If it were not true, then the best thing they could do with me was to bring me here. Then, too, if it were true, they would save themselves by hurrying me away; and if it were not true--You see, just as all roads lead to Rome, all roads led me to this Retreat. If it were true, it was enough to craze me; and if it were not true, I was already crazed. And there it is! I can't make out, sometimes, whether I am really beside myself or not; for it seems that whether I was crazed or sane, if it were true, they would naturally put me out of sight and hearing--bury me alive, as they have done, in this Retreat. (148)

Moments later, however, she vows to Elizabeth that she will tell the story coherently and factually, but expresses doubt regarding her ability to do so: "Now, I am not going to be incoherent. . . . I will just tell you the story of it all exactly as it was, and you shall judge. If I can, that is--oh, if I can!" (148-9). To further underscore the problem of reliability, Spofford's narrator seems to have a difficult time keeping things and people straight. First, she accuses her rival of being mad, although Elizabeth and the reader "know" it is the narrator herself who has lost her reason. Next, and even more tellingly, she tries to reassure Elizabeth of her sanity by saying: "Don't be afraid of me: I am as much myself, I tell you, as you are," and then proceeds to mock herself for the circularity of her statement:

What an absurdity! Certainly any one who heard me make such a speech would think I was insane and without benefit of clergy.

To ask you not to be afraid of me because I am myself. Isn't that what they call a vicious circle? And then to cap the climax by adding that I am as much myself as you are myself! But no matter--you know better. (149)

Moreover, at a number of points, the narrator expresses confusion about which of her memories are grounded in reality and which are the products of a diseased imagination, creating in the reader's mind a significant doubt about the accuracy of any of her recollections. If she is confused about who is who and what is what, what are we, who are trying to eavesdrop on this private one-sided conversation to think?

This explicit planting of doubt in the reader's mind about the reliability of the narrator's perspective serves, however, not to undermine the story's meaning but to develop it. The narrator's confusion provides insight rather than a barrier to the meaning of her story because it upsets the easy division we are inclined to make into well-defined categories of good and evil. Through the disjunctures of reality that are the consequence of her apparent insanity, commonly held conventions, notably those found in popular narratives, are jarred.

The division of womanhood into two opposing extremes, the virgin and the whore, and the narrative recounting the struggle between these two types over the heart, soul, and body of a man, is deeply embedded in the popular romance novel of nineteenth-century America and was one of Spofford's favorite themes, as we have already seen in "The Amber Gods." Readers who are familiar with this convention, and surely all of Spofford's readers would have been, might think they had no trouble telling who is who. A society that attempted to bifurcate gender and morality along rigidly drawn lines of behavior, and a popular literature that reflected, developed, and perpetuated these stereotypes were convinced that they were clear on exactly what good and bad women looked and acted like. Reading "Her Story" within these conventions, they would be primed to see the narrator as the victim, the husband as the villain, and the "other woman" as a traitor to her sex. Physical description provided the visual and visible marks of these stereotypes, for traditionally the essential inner character of each type of woman would be revealed by her appearance, especially her coloring. But

early on in "Her Story," Spofford uses conventional language to describe her characters in a way that challenges our expectations. First, the narrator describes herself in terms that are vague and ambiguous, mixing light and dark imagery: "I was tall and slender, and if my skin was pale it was clear with a pearly clearness, and the lashes of my gray eyes were black as shadow" (150). The description of her rival is more self-consciously contradictory:

She was a little thing--a little thing, but wondrous fair. Fair, did I say? No: she was dark as an Egyptian, but such perfect features, such rich and splendid color, such great soft eyes--so soft, so black--so superb a smile; and then such hair! When she let it down, the backward curling ends lay on the ground and she stood on them, or the children lifted them and carried them behind her as pages carry a queen's train. (149)

Later on the rival's hair is described as "the very color of the jacinth, with that red tint in its darkness that they call black in the shade and gold in the sun" (157). With a complexion that is both fair and dark, and long red hair that turns from black to gold, the rival resembles both the witch and the heroine of a fairy tale.

In keeping with her blurring of physical traits, Spofford also plays tricks with the personalities and temperaments of the two women. The rival is described as exotic, sensuous, moody, and brilliant. Her most important and powerful attributes are her artistic nature and her many talents, which range from the typically feminine arts of needlework and drawing to the more daring and forbidden arts of dance and theater. The narrator, like her rival, is also primarily identified as an artist. Not only does she sing and play the piano, but it was her talent that drew Spencer to her in the first place, and it was their mutual passion for music that sustained their relationship. But, unlike her rival, the narrator is modest to the point of primness and selfless to the point of martyrdom. Her attempts to conform to prevailing standards of womanly behavior do not serve her well in her struggles to retain artistic as well as sexual primacy in her husband's eyes. The struggle between the narrator's artistic and sexual passions, and her attempt to conform to convention coincides with the struggle between the two women. Both come to a climax in the narrator's last moments of sanity. According to her

description of this dramatic scene, she entered the drawing room one evening to witness her rival playing the harp with such skill "that it sang itself, like some great prisoned soul" and singing in "so rich a voice" that her own seemed "white and thin." Having kept her singing "for her last reserve," the rival finally provoked Spencer to a passionate embrace which was broken when the narrator "crashed down both my hands on the keyboard before me, and stood and glared upon them" (164). This final expression of rage is the last thing the narrator remembered before waking up in the asylum.

We see then, by examining the physical, emotional, and artistic characteristics of the two women, the fair and good wife, and the dark and evil rival, that their characteristics tend to blend together at times, indeed, almost to merge. Within the story that we, as the eavesdropping readers, imaginatively believe is being told by the narrator to her friend Elizabeth, the "other woman" plays the role of the evil seductress while the narrator plays that of the innocent victim, who may or may not be mad. However, by manipulating the convention of the light and dark woman, by presenting both women as artists, and by allowing the rival to assume the narrator's place as Spencer's sexual partner by appropriating her role as his artistic partner, Spofford's text supports a reading that these two women are essentially the same.

This strange connection between the two women is made concrete in the body of the grotesque woman who appears on the final page of the story and with which I began this chapter. According to the narrator, this witchlike creature, instead of horrifying her, provides her with a person to care for and a means of escape from the dreariness of her own condition. Through the simple act of trying to make this mad woman smile, the narrator is given the opportunity to provide a service to another person, thus allowing her to go outside herself, and to escape from her own horrifying sense of isolation and abandonment. As for the grotesque woman, her entire existence seems to be focused on the narrator. Although she appears to have no consciousness--her mind is described as "dead"--she follows the narrator about and "seems to want to do something for me, to propitiate me" (166). She is, we are told, so bound to the narrator that she will only sleep with her hand in hers.

Borrowing another technique from Poe, Spofford often introduces in her best stories a final twist in the plot which causes the reader suddenly to realize that what we had thought to be true was not and that the real truth is more shocking than we had expected. This moment occurs at the very end of "Her Story" with the reader's startled recognition that the grotesque, deformed woman who appears on the last page is, in fact, the "other woman," the evil but beautiful rival, who had seemed, throughout the text, to have been victorious. The woman who had once been described as "a little thing . . . dark as an Egyptian" (149) is transformed in the end into "a little woman, swarthy as a Malay" (166). The gorgeous hair that once fell to the ground and seemed to belong to a queen has become like fungus in the night, and whiter than leprosy. The soft black eyes are now dark and dim, veiled by long white eyebrows. The mind that was once so brilliant is now dead. All we are told about how the mad woman lost her mind and her beauty is that she was hit on the head by a stone from a falling spire. Since Spencer had devoted half his fortune to building a church that would be a monument to his aesthetic vision, we are meant, I believe, to read the fate of the other woman as signifying that she too is a victim of male power, both the individual, represented by Spencer, and that of patriarchal institutions, symbolized by the church. Indeed, since the stone that struck her, turning her into a monster, had fallen from a church spire, we are invited to see the cause of her destruction as the phallic power of man-made institutions.

However similar the language that connects the grotesquely deformed creature in the asylum to the beautiful and talented rival, their identity is not explicit in the narrative for it is not understood by the narrator or, we assume, by her listener. The ability to read the meaning of the story told by the imprisoned narrator has been given by Spofford to us alone, and only if we are attentive. In this way, a bond of understanding is established between the previously invisible author and the hidden, eavesdropping reader who now share a consciousness of truth that is outside the confining boundaries of the narrator's monologue.

As in "The Amber Gods," this insight, which sheds new light on the entire story, comes at its close, creating the necessity of rereading what had appeared to be a conventional narrative from a startling new perspective.

Once we are able to join the author outside the limits of the narrator's version of her story, we are no longer limited to the narrator's own view of herself. Going back into the text, we now are able to see the radical transformation that has turned an extraordinarily beautiful woman into an extraordinarily grotesque monster as a mirror-like representation of the narrator's own story. We now read her story not just as one in which a woman is betrayed by a rival but as the transformation of a shy orphan singing in church into an angry madwoman raving in an asylum.

In the end, all the unnamed women in the story--the narrator, the rival, and the grotesque mad woman--merge into one. Even Elizabeth and, by extension, the (female) reader converge. The narrator's earlier apparent confusion--"I am as much myself as you are myself"--is now seen to have accurately predicted the accumulation of merged identities.³⁶ The story told as "Her Story," is the story of them all. The real story, the one told not by the narrator to Elizabeth but by Harriet Spofford to the reader, is finally clear. The message is that any woman--whether she appears to herself and the world as innocent and good or as sophisticated and evil--who goes beyond the bounds allowed by society, will be destroyed as hopelessly as the monstrous woman whose story this really is. Should any woman break out of the social bounds of men's control, either by allowing herself to express her own emotions and needs, as the narrator did when she pounded on the piano in rage, or by insisting on her own autonomy, as the rival did when she mounted her horse to ride freely, she will eventually be forcibly subdued and confined. Although the narrator and her rival had appeared earlier to be opposites, both end up imprisoned in the asylum. Both women, the one who tried to conform to her prescribed role as loving wife and mother, and the one who insisted on breaking the rules of behavior for women, end up physically and mentally deformed.

³⁶ Given this statement coupled with the fact that Elizabeth and Spencer are the only two named characters in the story, it is possible that Spofford intended for Elizabeth to have no "real" identity but to be a projection of the narrator's imagination, a kind of alter ego. If this was her plan, she did not provide sufficient internal guides for the reader to follow her to this conclusion. However, there is ample evidence to see that the grotesque mad woman and the rival are one and the same, and to recognize the ways in which all the women in the narrative share the same story.

In the last moments of the monologue, as her visitor prepares to leave, the narrator grasps for a ray of hope. Perhaps, she imagines, her husband will send "some old friend who knew me before my trouble--who will see me and judge, and carry back report that I am all I used to be--some friend who will open the gates of heaven to me, or close the gates of hell upon me--who will hold my life and my fate" (166). But even as she begs Elizabeth, in the final line, to be that person who will make it possible for her to return to the comfort of her husband's arms, we, the readers who are privy to the real meaning of the story being told, understand that those women who believe they have seen heaven in the arms of a man are destined to lives of betrayal and despair. We are still able to hear the pleas of the deformed woman whose case has been labeled hopeless by the doctor and who follows the narrator like a dog. The only comfort that seems possible is found in the bonds between women, represented by the image of the narrator and the deformed woman lying hand and hand, through they remain trapped within the walls of the asylum.

Although told from opposite viewpoints by women who, on the surface, appear to be opposite in nature, "The Amber Gods" and "Her Story" are both profoundly pessimistic explorations of the state of middle-class, white, heterosexual women in the second half of the nineteenth century in America, whose options seem to be bound by passivity, frailty, silence, and conformity on the one side and by excess, madness, self-destruction, and deviance on the other. Spofford dramatized the crippling nature of this dilemma by presenting figures of the deformed female--the dwarfed Asian slave and the witchlike madwoman--as minor characters who appear to be situated on the margins of the text, but who actually serve as grotesque doubles of the narrating protagonists whose "real" nature they portray. By depicting these doubles as non-white and foreign-born, Spofford challenged the popular image of the white, middle- and upper-class American woman as the paragon of true womanhood. By portraying them as stunted, deformed, and mad, she gave visible expression to what she perceived as the "real" condition of women and the consequences that face any woman who refuses to conform to social norms.

In both stories, the connection between the "deformed" marginal figure and the "normal" protagonist is made through allusions to non-white racial identification. The ancient servant of "The Amber Gods," in addition to being no higher than a yardstick, was specifically marked as non-white, both through her origins--from an Asian island--and her appearance--most often described as "black." In fact, she seems at various times to be depicted as a member of every "race" that is not white. Her social status--she is first a slave, then a servant--clearly marks her as outside the middle-class. Her social behavior throughout the story is described as erratic, out of control, furious, and "perfectly mad" (44). Through metaphoric echoes, the traits of the Asian dwarf are attributed to the more "normal" narrator. Yone, whose ethnic background is half-Italian and half-English, and is likened to an Egyptian and a West Indian. Through these allusions, she is given an exotic identity that is outside the "normal" white, middle-class society of her father, even though her actual coloring is "golden blond," just like father's, and she carries his thoroughly Anglo-Saxon name of Willoughby. Most importantly, like the Asian slave, Yone's darker passions of anger and jealousy bring on her own destruction. Despite Yone's apparent privilege and wealth, she is defined, as a woman who deviates from her gender-determined role, by the deformed figure who is her double.

A similar pairing of a "normal" and a "deviant" woman who are presented as being both different and the same through a manipulation of signs of racial and class difference is found in "Her Story." Through their marginal social status as orphans, the narrator and her rival underscore the social and financial dependency that was a reality for nearly all women, and which served to place women in competition with each other for the status and protection of a man. The men who have the power to protect, on the other hand, are, like Spencer, morally weak and primarily interested in the fulfillment of their own pleasure. Through their eventual confinement as madwomen, the two women represent all women who have no control over their own lives. As in "The Amber Gods," the more explicitly deviant figure is physically marked by deformity and racially marked as non-white. Even before being hit on the head, the narrator's beautiful rival had been described as being "dark as an Egyptian." After her confinement, this once beautiful

woman is transformed into a grotesquely deformed monster who is not only unusually little, but linked by her appearance to the malevolent dwarfs of fairy tales. Described as "swarthy as a Malay," the imprisoned rival shifts her identity from that of an exotic but nonetheless "normal" white woman with a dark complexion into a racial category that would have been defined by most late-nineteenth-century readers as subhuman. As they come together in the asylum to sleep hand in hand, both the narrator and her rival discover that behavior that fails to fit into that prescribed as appropriate for women--anger, independence, and unrestrained sexuality--will result in madness and imprisonment.

In the cultural climate of late-nineteenth-century America, Spofford's depiction of female characters who were physically deformed, racially marked, and emotionally out of control, and her implicit linking of these deviant characters to a female protagonist who should have been--by gender, race, and class--the carrier and preserver of the status quo, constituted a literary act that can only be described as radically subversive. Deeply embedded in nineteenth-century English and American thought was the belief that if society was to be maintained and even improved, it was to be through the efforts of women whose more spiritual and nurturing nature was not subject to the passions and ambitions that characterize men. Spofford's women did not fit this mold.

Nonetheless, while Spofford's depiction of her female characters in "The Amber Gods" and "Her Story" can be seen as challenging the mandate placed on the American woman to be the carrier and preserver of a set of social mores that are emotionally repressive, the ultimate message of these stories appears to be more despairing than defiant. Although Yone and her double, the Asian slave, both attempt to rebel against the confinement of their roles, neither are successful. The slave ends, after "all the effervescence was gone," as "a mysterious tame servant," driven from both her natural and adopted homes, unable to prevent a destructive marriage by the young girl in her charge to the heir of the man who had originally captured her (44). And Yone, for all her passion and defiance, succeeds only in making herself sick enough to cause her own death. The situation is even more bleak in "Her Story," where we are left with a nightmarish vision of two women trapped

together in an insane asylum: one, the once seductive rival, reduced to a grotesque dwarf whose dark dim eyes reveal only a mind that is dead; the other, the once devoted wife, transformed into a madwoman whose life has been destroyed by jealousy, rage, and disillusionment. In both of these stories, the consequences of female rebellion are exile, sooner or later, from the safe though oppressive home into either a hostile world which has no place for them, or an asylum for the insane, or death.

What is behind this extraordinarily bleak vision? Why did a writer like Spofford, one of the earliest and most successful women writers of her generation, whose own personal life seems to have been conducted without apparent conflict, depict women as mad and deformed failures rather than as powerful amazons or triumphant goddesses? Surely, this was not a return to a literature whose main purpose was to warn young women of "the wages of Sin." It was precisely because her fiction lacked this "high moral purpose" that young Henry James chided Spofford for the "dangerous influence" her stories might have on the young. One obvious answer is that change never comes easily or without self-doubt. The period just before and after the Civil War was one of profound and rapid social change in America. Writers like Spofford and the other subjects of this study, whose careers were launched during this period, were better able than the generation that preceded them to engage in activities that previously had been off-limits for women and to aspire to goals that had only a generation before been seen as impossible, but they were not yet able to take these activities and aspirations for granted, and consequently they were always aware that they were challenging and defying the norms of behavior appropriate to their gender, class, and race. In addition, as definitions of sexuality and standards of appropriate sexual behavior began to change radically during this period, each of the writers in this study experienced herself as deviating, in some way, from the norms that attempted to restrict emotional and sexual feelings. Despite Spofford's apparent conformity as a woman engaged in what appears to have been a mutually satisfying marriage, she appears to have experienced concern that her passion for her husband was excessive and unnatural.

Another early story by Spofford, "The Strathsays," gives us a little more information to support this speculation. It was published in 1863, the same

year her first bound collection, The Amber Gods and Other Stories, came out dedicated to her future husband, who she was to marry two years later. Alice Strathsay, the narrator, is the youngest of four daughters of a severe and repressed mother whose husband had died before Alice was born. The matriarchal Mrs. Strathsay has specific plans for the marriage of each of her daughters. The eldest is to marry the former partner of her father, "a little wizened warlock" whose only interest is making money. Although she dutifully obeys her mother and marries him, he dies after she has given birth to a son. The second fails in love with an infamous pirate and consequently refuses her intended husband, an earl with a drinking problem; her will pitted against her mother's, they reach a compromise in which the daughter gives up her true love on the condition that her mother gives up her plans for her marriage. The third daughter is a victim of this struggle; she is wooed and won by the pirate in order to get revenge on the mother and ultimately drowns under suspicious circumstances when she tries to run away with him. But the strangest case is the narrator's. Alice, who is the only one of the three to resemble her father (in appearance as well as in temperament), is meant to marry Angus, the son of her mother's closest friend. The surprise is that there is no conflict here. Alice loves Angus passionately and he loves her. The problem is that despite the parental approval, the passion between them is so powerful that it nearly destroys her. On the day she becomes aware of her feelings, an accident occurs when a match which Angus had used to light a magic lantern that he had brought as a present for her catches her veil on fire. Although she barely survives the fire, her face is left horribly scarred. As Alice puts it, "I who had aye been the flower of the race, the pride of the name, could not now bide to brook my own glance in the glass" (104). Her own mother is so horrified by her appearance that she faints when she sees her and refuses for some time to come near her. Aware that her appearance is hideous and fearing that Angus can never love her, Alice removes herself from society and hides on the fringes. Angus's love, however, is true. Her deformity does not destroy it (as it had seemed to have destroyed even her mother's love) and he eventually woos her back to him. They marry and have a son who resembles her father. It would seem that, as Alice says at the end, "we have grown to be a glad and peaceful family at length" (118).

But at what price is this happiness bought? What about the other daughters, one widowed, one forced to deny her love, and one dead? Why is fire used throughout the story as a metaphor for love and passion? And why is it that the language used to describe the outlaw pirate seems really to be describing the hideously scarred Alice? For though it is Alice who hides from being seen, it is the pirate who is described as being "a lonely man, in fact, who lived aloof and apart, shunned and shunning, tainted by the curse of his birth" (111) and while it is her face that is grotesquely scarred, it is his that appears to the family as "a ghastly forehead, a grim white face, a terrible face, pressed against the glass, and glaring in with awful eyes" (117). "The Strathsays" is provocative in its ambiguities and seems to express some of the concerns Harriet Prescott Spofford might have felt about whether her own passions, even her socially sanctioned love for her husband-to-be, might be "neither right nor natural" (Halbeisen 118). The resolution of the story confirms her hope that she will be loved despite her flaws, since Angus continues to love Alice despite her grotesque deformities. But the pirate outlaw and the other sisters, one dead, the other two living half-lives of repression, express her deepest fears about her own self-perceived deviance. As someone who experienced professional ambitions as well as emotional and sexual passions not considered appropriate for a woman of her race and class, Spofford felt in some sense marked as a deviant who she feared others might perceive as being a monster or a freak rather than a normal woman.

When Pattee wrote about Harriet Prescott Spofford in 1923, he noted that "[f]ew have made so deep an impression upon their first readers and then have disappeared so completely" (163). The reason, he speculated, was because of the shift in literary taste that followed the Civil War. Spofford may have led him to this explanation when, in response to a question he asked her as he prepared the material for his study, she explained why she did not continue writing in her earliest style:

You wonder why I did not continue in the vein of "The Amber Gods." I suppose because the public taste had changed. With the coming of Mr. Howells as editor of the Atlantic, and his influence, the realistic arrived. I doubt if anything I wrote in

those days would be accepted by any magazine now. (Halbeisen 122)

William Dean Howells became assistant editor of the Atlantic Monthly in 1866; in 1871, he succeeded James T. Fields as editor. If it is true that the influence of Howells caused Spofford to change her style, she was left with a very small window of hardly a decade during which to write in her own voice, a very short period for a writer whose career extended more than half a century and included at least two hundred seventy five short stories that have been identified and twenty-three bound volumes of fiction, poetry, and prose. Because of Pattee's influence as one of the first academics to write seriously about American literature, his explanation for Spofford's decline has persisted. However, one wonders whether Spofford herself was accurate in her estimate of Howells's response to her work. He had, after all, chosen "Circumstance" for his anthology, The Great Modern American Stories, published in 1920, and had written in his introduction of

the awful joy of Miss Prescott's (not yet Mrs. Spofford's) tremendous story of "Circumstance," still unsurpassed of its kind. We thrilled over it severally and collectively (the whole 20,000 of us), and are still ready to swear it unsurpassed, though we are now over 70 or 80 years old and 200,000 in number. (v)

It may well be that as a professional writer whose income was dependent upon magazine publication, Spofford tried to respond to the changing public taste by altering her own style and subject matter. If so, she succeeded well enough to continue to publish and maintain a reputation as a significant literary figure into the twentieth century, even though she was never again to experience the artistic success of her earliest works. It also may be that as she settled into her life as a married woman who was the head of a large household and a respected member of Boston and Washington society, she chose to move away from the position of passionate rebellion that her earliest stories had occupied. Perhaps the vision of the mad wife and her grotesque companion in "Her Story" offered too bleak a vision for the author herself to continue to imagine. The deformed figures that haunted her early fiction may have given too vivid a form to her fear that the passions of art and sexuality can only lead, in a repressive society, to madness and deformity.

One of the longest lived of her generation, Harriet Prescott Spofford died in 1921. As late as 1936, the American critic Arthur Hobson Quinn wrote of her: "The artist who wrote "The Amber Gods" in 1860 and published The Elder's People in 1920, surveying the complete circle between romantic idealism and classic realism, remains a remarkable phenomenon in our literature" (214). This was about the last anyone heard of her until "Circumstance" appeared in Judith Fetterley's important collection Provisions in 1985 and The Amber Gods and Other Stories, edited by Alfred Bendixson, was published in 1989. There still has been, however, very little critical attention given to her work, and Pattee's assessment of her plunge into obscurity remains essentially true.³⁷ In a sense, it may be that her own deviance from what is considered "normal" continues to damage Spofford's reputation. She is a writer who never wrote the "right" subject matter in the "right" style. Her best material was too exotic and romantic for the conservatives of the late nineteenth century who were trying to hold onto a white, middle-class, Anglo-European way of life in which each gender stayed within its well-defined role, and sexuality remained largely repressed and therefore contained. But she was also out of step with the moves towards realism and modernism that followed the Civil War, and that dominated the literature being written and read by women with feminist politics and sensibilities. Even today, despite our growing fascination with fantasy and "magic realism," the emphasis of most feminist critics who examine the nineteenth century has been on either the popular writers of the sentimental tradition, or writers like Davis, Freeman, Chopin, Jewett, Gilman, and Cather whose works were more grounded in realism. Spofford is worth reading if for no other reason than that she breaks outside these genres. But more than that, she can be fruitfully read today for what she tells us about how passionate women can achieve and lose power and personal identity.

³⁷ The MLA bibliography lists only six entries for Spofford since 1981, five relatively short articles and one dissertation.

2. Self-Loathing and Self-Destruction: Rebecca Harding Davis

Rebecca Harding Davis was four years older than Harriet Prescott Spofford, but unlike the younger writer, who was one of the last practitioners of a fading genre, Davis became one of the most significant pioneers of American realism, the genre that dominated American literature between the romanticism of the American Renaissance and the modernism of the twentieth century. It was her aim, she stated in one of her novels, to convince her reader "to dig into this commonplace, this vulgar American life, and see what is in it." She had little patience, she wrote, with those who sought only "idyls delicately tinted . . . to lift [them] out of this crowded, tobacco-stained commonplace" (Howth 6). While Spofford affected a European style and appropriated conventions drawn from popular literature, Davis self-consciously rejected a literary tradition which she felt was false, sentimental, and based on English rather than American models. She would have nothing to do with a literature that relied on worn-out cultural stereotypes in which "the heroine glides into life full-charged with rank, virtues, a name three-syllabled, and a white dress that never needs washing, ready to sail through dangers dire into a triumphant haven of matrimony" (Howth 102). Given their different approaches to literature, it is not surprising to find Davis expressing her dislike for Spofford's writing in a letter to Annie Fields, whose husband published the work of both writers (Harris, 118).

Davis criticism has understandably emphasized her pioneering role in the development of realism and, more specifically, American proletarian fiction. I have a different focus here. My interest is not in genre, per se, but in extending my discussion of deformity in women's writing to an examination of fiction that was written with the express intent of representing a particular author's version of reality. Deformed figures play extraordinarily important roles in Davis's earliest and most important works, "Life in the Iron Mills" (1861) and Margret Howth (1862). My readings of these works explore the narrative functions served by these deformed figures and how they represent Davis's own struggles as an artist.

The ontological nature of deformed figures in Davis's works is very different from those in Spofford's. Although Spofford's grotesque dwarfs and madwomen are presented to the reader as "real" beings existing within a fictional text, they have the quality of imaginary projections of overheated or overstressed minds. The deformed figures of the Asian slave in "The Amber Gods" and the madwoman in "Her Story" seem to be drawn from literary tradition more than from actual life, due in part to the supercharged language with which they are drawn and the burden of symbolic meaning they carry, far exceeding their importance in the plot. Their power comes from their exoticism, which places them outside the boundaries of normal middle-class American life. Like figures in a fairy tale, their existence is unsubstantial and magical.

Rebecca Harding Davis's deformed figures, in contrast, assume a natural place in the text as "real" characters who are drawn from the commonplace life it was Davis's aim to depict. Their deformities underscore and define the gritty reality of Davis's world, rather than providing an escape from it. Physical deformity was, in fact, a reality of late-nineteenth-century life, especially as America converted from an agrarian to an industrial economy. As many nineteenth-century social reformers noted, deformity was one of the specific consequences of the inhuman conditions of factory work. Industrial accidents, poor nutrition, domestic violence, and spinal tuberculosis resulted in bodies that were maimed, broken, and distorted.³⁸ Consequently, deformed bodies were common realities in factory towns like Wheeling, Virginia, where Davis was raised, and actual models would have existed for her deformed characters. From one perspective, then, we might account for the deformed figures in Davis's fiction as realistic representations of the physical and emotional damage done to human beings under the destructive forces of poverty and degradation. So viewed, they confirm a

³⁸ Social reformers were particularly concerned with the physical deformity of women caused by poor working conditions. According to David S. Reynolds in Beneath the American Renaissance (1988), early reformist novels, dating back to the mid-century, "emphasized that factory work damaged most women both physically and psychologically, leaving them with spinal diseases, bad lungs, twisted bodies, and crushed spirits" (353). One of the forms taken by tuberculosis, which reached epidemic proportions in the nineteenth century, affected the spine, creating a hunchback in its victims.

reading of Davis's work that emphasizes her social reformist mission. I propose, however, that the significance of these figures extends far beyond realistic representation and that by examining how deformed characters work in Davis's fiction, we can gain new insights into her creative process and her personal struggles, her artistic intentions and her failures.

"Life in the Iron Mills" was originally published in the April 1861 edition of the Atlantic Monthly. At the time, its author, Rebecca Harding, was a thirty-year-old single woman, living with her family in the industrial town of Wheeling, Virginia, located on the Ohio River, the border between the free and slave states.³⁹ With the same apparent confidence and ambition shown by her slightly younger contemporary, Harriet Spofford, Davis submitted her first serious work to the most prestigious literary periodical of the time. The response was enthusiastic and immediate. James Fields, who had taken over the editorship of the Atlantic, not only accepted the story, paying her \$50, but offered her an additional \$100 for her next work, which she refused on the grounds that it might cause her to compromise her writing, a gesture that was, as it turned out, ironic, as will be seen when we examine Margret Howth. Nathaniel Hawthorne, to whom Davis sent a copy, wrote a complimentary note to the author and asked if he could come visit her while on an upcoming trip to Virginia. To her disappointment, he had to cancel the trip, but the honor of being acknowledged by a writer she greatly admired remained. Davis was invited by Annie and James Fields to come to Boston for a visit and when she was finally able to come, a year later, she was introduced to the most important literary figures of New England, including Hawthorne. The publication of this single story created such a stir in the literary world that it won immediate recognition for Davis as important author. We even have evidence that Emily Dickinson was interested in the story from a note she sent to her sister-in-law asking "Will Sue please lend Emily 'Life in the Iron Mills'--and accept Blossom" (Harris 1).

³⁹ Although both "Life in the Iron Mills" and Margret Howth were published before Davis's marriage when her name was Rebecca Harding, I will use her married name throughout since that is the name by which she was known during most of her writing career and the one universally used today.

Davis's reputation declined, however, during her own lifetime, eclipsed by her more famous son, Richard Harding Davis. She had come close to being forgotten, when, in 1972, the American writer, Tillie Olsen, who had read "Life in the Iron Mills" when she was fifteen in an old copy of the Atlantic, succeeded in getting it reprinted by the Feminist Press. Due in large measure to that edition, which included a long biographical essay by Olsen, Davis's first published story has once again come to be seen as one of the significant literary landmarks of the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁴⁰

Davis's rise from obscurity to recognition by the best writers of her own time and her recent reemergence as author of one of the newest entries into the American canon has led to a false perception that she was a primitive genius who appeared out of nowhere. This perception was fueled by Olsen, who used her essay on Davis as the centerpiece in her own influential book, Silences (1978), constructing, in effect, the earlier author as a paradigm for the silenced woman writer and a surrogate for her own experience as a woman writer from a working-class background. In the words of Sharon M. Harris, whose Rebecca Harding Davis and American Realism (1991) is one of only two published full-length studies to be devoted to the author and the most significant study since Olsen's, "a significant gap in Davis scholarship has been the belief that, like a phoenix, she somehow arose out of the (quite literal) ashes of Wheeling, West Virginia, and into the pages of American's most renowned literary journal of the period" (Harris 4).

Biographical research by Harris as well as by Jean Fagin Yellin, for her afterward to the Feminist Press's 1990 edition of Margret Howth, has revised these misconceptions.⁴¹ We now know that Davis was no unschooled

⁴⁰ The current status of "Life in the Iron Mills" within the American canon is reflected by its inclusion in The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Third Edition. Evidence of Davis's relative insignificance, until recently, is found in volume 12 on American Realists and Naturalists of the Dictionary of Literary Biography (1982), edited by Donald Pizer and Earl N. Herbert, which mentions Rebecca Harding Davis only in passing in an essay on her son, Richard Harding Davis, a writer of popular fiction.

⁴¹ In addition to the studies by Olsen, Harris, and Yellin, Jane Atteridge Rose has added Rebecca Harding Davis (1993) to the Twayne series, and Reynolds has provided an important new perspective on "Life in the Iron Mills" by identifying numerous stories and novels describing

primitive, but a woman of relative privilege who had access to the main ideas and literature of her time. Although she appeared on the literary scene from an industrial frontier town in West Virginia, dominated by factories and populated primarily by working-class immigrants and blacks, both free and enslaved, she herself was a member of a middle-class family, with an exceptionally well-educated mother and an English-born father. She was taught at home by her mother until she was fourteen when she was sent to live in the home of her aunt Rebecca Blaine in Washington, Pennsylvania, site of Washington College, so she could be more formally educated at Washington Female Seminary. There she enjoyed a supportive and intellectual family life (her cousin James G. Blaine was to become a Presidential candidate) as well as the stimulation of a college town. She graduated valedictorian three years later, and returned to Wheeling to help educate her younger brothers and sisters at home. She engaged in discussions about literature, politics, and science with her family members, including her brother, Hugh, who was a teacher then principal at Wheeling Classical Academy, and eventually became a professor of mathematics and physics at Lehigh University. In addition to having a rich intellectual life within her family, she developed her literary skills through a journalistic apprenticeship, working at least part-time as an editorial correspondent for the Wheeling Intelligencer where, as she later wrote to her editor, James Fields, she published "reviews of new books. A few verses and stories, impelled by the necessity or whim of the moment" (Yellin 277). Far from being a naive "gem in the raw," as many of her readers have assumed she was, Davis was already a dedicated writer who held high literary ambitions, and who was conscious of her literary methods and goals when she wrote her first important work, "Life in the Iron Mills."

the plight of the working class in sentimental as well as realistic terms that preceded it in his comprehensive review of non-canonical literature, Beneath the American Renaissance. All of these critics tend to view Davis's work primarily from the perspective of genre. Besides these recent studies, biographical and critical accounts can be found in William F. Grayburn, "The Major Fiction of Rebecca Harding Davis," Ph. D. dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1965; Gerald Langford, The Richard Harding Davis Years: A Biography of a Mother and Son (1961); and Helen Woodward Sheaffer, "Rebecca Harding Davis, Pioneer Realist," Ph. D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1947. An important source of biographical information and critical insight for all these writers is Davis's autobiographical work, Bits of Gossip (1902).

Framing the narrative within a monologue in which a self-consciously constructed authorial voice describes her methods and intentions, Davis makes it clear from the beginning of the story that hers is to be a new kind of fiction. This frame that brackets her story is crucial to understanding the entire work. Through this device, Davis's narrator is presented as a well-defined persona, although one whose gender is not clearly determined, who is given imaginative substance as an embodied person speaking from within a describable physical space. Moreover, the person to whom she is speaking is also given a clear identity and physical presence in the frame. The drama that takes place on the margins of the narrative, including the dynamic between the narrator and listener, and the final isolation of the narrator in the end, is nearly as important as the story itself.⁴² In the opening frame, Davis's narrator creates the context in which her story will unfold, a story apparently not about her own life, but about the lives of two individuals from a background and class that are different from either her own or that of her listener. "Life in the Iron Mills" is presented as if it were a representative case study intended to describe a group of people who are unable to describe themselves. Davis sets up the story as if the narrator were a photographer showing a photograph to a friend. When viewing a photograph in isolation, the tendency of most viewers is to forget the person behind the camera who was responsible for selecting and framing the image, and to accept the photograph as an unmediated image of reality. But Davis insists that we remain conscious of the point of view of the person who creates the image by purposefully showing us not just the picture, but the person who isolates and records it. By doing this, she makes it impossible to view the image, no matter how realistic it may be, from a naive point of view which ignores its context and the person who brings it to us.

Because Davis has chosen to give her narrator the self-appointed responsibility for telling the story of someone else, the reader is immediately forced to make a judgement about the trustworthiness of the narrator's perceptions and interpretations. Just as we had to determine whether the

⁴² Through the device of the frame, Davis's narrative structure in "Life in the Iron Mills" takes on more complexity than the dramatic monologue employed by Spofford in "The Amber Gods" and "Her Story."

narrator of "Her Story" had a sufficient grasp of reality to provide a reliable version of her own story, so we have to determine how much we can trust the narrator of this story to tell us the truth about the lives of other people. Were the story intended primarily as a journalistic account of the lives of the poor, we would expect Davis to establish her narrator's credibility. Instead, Davis gives us reasons to distrust her. First, she casts doubt on the range and accuracy of her narrator's perspective by letting us know that she is speaking from inside a house, positioned above and separate from the people who are her subjects. Moreover, she makes it clear that the narrator's view is limited by the boundaries of her two windows; in fact, the narrator tells us that she "can scarcely see through the rain." Not only is her vision limited and blurred, but the little she can see through the windows is distorted by the lens of her own imagination. She admits to the reader that she is an idle person living on the sidelines of life and inclined to have fanciful ideas. She tells us that as a child she "used to fancy a look of wary, dumb appeal upon the face of the negro-like river" and that even now she has "something of the same idle notion" when she looks down on the "slow stream of human life creeping past" (12). Then, a moment later, she undercuts her own observation by informing us that "my fancy about the river was an idle one" (13). When she then presents an image of herself as "idly tapping the window-pane" while the "fragments of an old story float up before me," when she goes on to admit that not only is she unsure about why she has chosen this particular story, but that the story itself is "half-forgotten," we have, I think, no choice but to question her perception of the facts and the meaning of the story she tells (13-14). We are left to conclude that "Life in the Iron Mills" is as much about the nature of narration as it is about the lives of the working class.

Davis also uses the device of a fictional audience to set her story into a narrative context. By identifying her listener as an "amateur psychologist," a casual observer of human nature "who studies psychology in a lazy, dilettante way" (13), Davis sets up her audience as a member of the upper class, probably male, whose understanding of human beings, especially those who are members of the oppressed working class, is distorted by wealth and privilege. Moreover, identifying the listener in the story with the audience she imagines will read her work, Davis establishes an adversarial relationship in

which she assumes that her "friend," and by extension her readers, will find the narrative

a tiresome story . . . foggy as the day, sharpened with no sudden flashes of pain or pleasure . . . only the outline of a dull life, that long since, with thousands of dull lives like its own, was vainly lived and lost: thousands of them,--massed, vile, slimy lives, like those of the torpid lizards in yonder stagnant water-butt. (13)

This accumulation of details, with its anticipation of her protagonist's final act of self-mutilation ("sharpened with no sudden flashes of pain") and its crescendo to a tone of almost unbearable loathing, reflects an intensely painful expectation that her story will be despised and rejected.

Through her introductory frame, Davis establishes that her narrator and her narrator's listener are not the subjects of the story and that they have no real contact with the kind of people who are the subjects. They are spectators, just like the men who later enter the iron mill, more or less interested in understanding the lives of the people who are the subject of their gaze and in finding out their "secrets," and more or less trustworthy in their perceptions and conclusions. The narrator's perceptions are distorted by her "fancy," and the amateur psychologist's by his laziness and reliance on textbook theories. It would appear that the oppressed lack voices with which to speak for themselves, while the educated who have voices cannot accurately speak for the oppressed. Through the device of the frame, Davis makes it clear that she is telling a story, not representing reality. Despite an appearance that we are being invited, with her listener, to go down with her into the stream of actual human life, the narrator is really proposing a strictly fictional journey. In the following passage, often quoted as evidence of Davis's realism, she makes it clear that we are entering the narrator's imagination, not actually descending into the streets:

I am going to be honest. This is what I want you to do. I want you to hide your disgust, take no heed to your clean clothes, and come right down with me,--here, into the thickest of the fog and mud and foul effluvia. I want you to hear this story. There is a secret down here, in this nightmare fog, that has lain dumb for

centuries: I want to make it a real thing to you. (13-14; emphasis added)

The story told by the narrator is, as she says, “very simple,—only what I remember of the life of . . . a furnace-tender in one of Kirby & John's rolling-mills” (14). Hugh Wolfe, the young furnace-tender, had lived with his father and his cousin, Deborah in two cellar rooms of the house where the narrator now lives. One evening, after spending a day in the cotton mills where she works as a picker, Deborah takes Hugh's supper to him while he is working the night shift in the iron mills. The narrator suggests that Deborah, a deformed hunchback, is motivated by her romantic love for Hugh. While Hugh works and Deborah sleeps nearby on a heap of ash, the mill is visited by a group of men, consisting of the overseer, a son of one of the owner's, a town physician, a journalist, and a man named Mitchell—a Northerner who has come to study the institutions of the South. After a series of condescending comments on the mill and its workers, the visitors get ready to leave when Mitchell is startled by a figure of a woman crudely cut out of the korr (a waste material that is left after the iron is extracted from the ore). The figure was created by Hugh, whose passion for carving the korr occupies his off-hours. A connection is established between Hugh and Mitchell as Hugh tries to explain the meaning of the sculpture. After the visitors leave, and Wolfe and Deborah return to their home, Deborah reveals that she has stolen Mitchell's pocketbook and gives it to Hugh. She believes her act is a sacrificial one that will enable Hugh to marry a delicate young girl named Janey. After agonizing the rest of the day and night, Wolfe decides that he has a right to keep the money. However, he is caught and jailed, along with Deborah. After the trial, in which he is sentenced to nineteen years in jail, Wolfe is visited by Mitchell. He then lies on his bed, cuts his veins with a piece of iron, and bleeds to death. Deborah is befriended by a Quaker lady who gives her a home among the Quakers after she has served her jail sentence.

Where is “truth” to be found in this story? Not, according to Davis, in the distorted opinions of those whose privileges have given them voices. As we have seen in the introductory frame as well as in the remarks of the visitors to the mill, the privileged are unable to even perceive, let alone understand, the lives of the working class. This includes the narrator herself.

The only truth available in the story is found not in her insights or even in story she tells, but in the unmediated reality of the inchoate, mute, and deformed bodies of the poor themselves. In "Life in the Iron Mills," the bodies of the poor are substantive objects that function as texts upon which meaning is inscribed. Although the narrator is not a trustworthy interpreter of the human beings she is observing, Deb's deformed body, and the message Hugh Wolfe carves on the korl woman and then upon his own body are. But there is more to this text than an account of poverty, whether distorted or unmediated. On one level, to be sure, the purpose of Davis's story is to describe the oppressive conditions which destroy the bodies and souls of those who live on the margins of society because of poverty and class status, and she accomplishes that purpose by showing us their physical bodies. But beneath this level is another, in which the deformed bodies of the poor serve to inscribe the author's own plight as a woman and as an artist. This subtextual meaning is carried by the narrator who, although having little credibility as a reliable mediator between her working-class subjects and the reader, serves to reveal, while pretending to disguise, Davis's identification with both Deborah and the working class artist, Hugh Wolfe.

The narrator begins her story with Deborah as she returns from the mills to the cellar apartment she shares with Hugh and his father. The first person in the story to speak is an unnamed mulatto who works with Deb in the mill and who, along with a racially and culturally mixed "crowd of half-clad women," urges her to attend "a ball" being given that evening.⁴³ Deborah is, however, a poor Cinderella. An albino, her lips are blue, her skin a sickly white, her eyes red and watery. Moreover, she is "deformed, almost a hunchback" (17). Later, when Deb goes to the mill to take Hugh his supper, the narrator focuses her lens more closely on Deb's deformed body and instructs us to decipher its meaning. With her "thwarted woman's form, her colorless life, her waking stupor that smothered pain and hunger," the narrator suggests that Deb is "fit to be a type of her class" (21). But this is not

⁴³The use of the term "ball," with its upper class and fairy tale associations, to describe the working-class dance may have been a conscious ironic move to juxtapose the actual conditions of the poor with the cultural constructions that define their own understandings of their lives.

all she is, and the narrator goes on to suggest that we must make a special attempt to read the full meaning revealed by her body and face:

Deeper yet if one could look, was there nothing worth reading in this wet, faded thing, half-covered with ashes? no story of a soul filled with groping passionate love, heroic unselfishness, fierce jealousy? of years of weary trying to please the one human being whom she loved, to gain one look of real heart-kindness from him? If anything like this were hidden beneath the pale, bleared eyes, and dull, washed-out-looking face, no one had ever taken the trouble to read its faint signs: not the half-clothed furnace-tender, Wolfe, certainly. (21-22)

The narrator may be right in proposing that Deb is a text worth reading, but she immediately misreads that text herself by imposing upon it a sentimentality derived from her own middle-class background. In the passage just cited, the narrator uses the language of the sentimental novel to turn the hunchback into a victimized romantic heroine in a story of unrequited love. To see in Deborah the “story of a soul filled with groping passionate love, heroic unselfishness, fierce jealousy” is to impose upon her a cultural context that is very different from her own. Because she can only understand Deb’s behavior and motivation through the language of a popular literary tradition, Davis makes it clear that her narrator’s reading of her character is distorted and by extension she shows us how people’s lives are susceptible to various interpretations depending on the viewpoint of the observer.

The narrator’s reading is not the only one seen through a cultural lens. Deborah’s comprehension of her own experience and her understanding of the meaning of her own life are also distorted and limited by the materials and beliefs she has available to her. In her case, the literary source is found in the folk tradition she brought with her as an immigrant from Wales. We see this perspective in the scene that takes place when Hugh and Deb return to their hovel, after their midnight encounter with the wealthy visitors. As Deb presents Hugh with the money she has stolen from Mitchell, she tells her version of reality in the framework of a fairy tale:

Hear till me only to-night! If one of t' witch people wud come, them we heard of t' home, and gif hur all hur wants, what then? . . . If one of t' witch dwarfs wud come from t' lane moors to-night, and gif hur money, to go out, --out, I say,--out, lad, where t' sun shines, and t' heath grows, and t' ladies walk in silken gownds, and God stays all t' time,--where t' man lives that talked to us to-night,--Hugh knows,--Hugh could walk there like a king! . . . If I were t' witch dwarf, if I had t' money, wud hur thank me? Wud hur take me out o' this place wid hur and Janey? I wud not come into the gran' house hur wud build, to vex hur wid t' hunch, --only at night, when t' shadows were dark, stand far off to see hur. (43)

This moving passage reveals that Deb's perception of herself is that of a stigmatized being who exists outside the boundaries of human society. Such a self-image carries with it a mixture of abjection and power. As Erving Goffman argues in Stigma, those individuals who are marked by "bodily signs of physical disorder," are seen by themselves and others as "not quite human," and can be overwhelmed by "self-hate and self-derogation" (1, 5, 7). However, he also observes that those who are outside the norm because of a single stigmatizing characteristic are often seen as possessing additional flaws and even extraordinary powers for "we tend to impute a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one, and at the same time to impute some desirable but undesired attributes, often of a supernatural cast, such as 'sixth sense,' or 'understanding'" (5). Through the folktales of her Welsh tradition, Deb knows that she is a misfit and, consequently, she has a deep sense of self-loathing, but the same cultural materials provide her with a narrative that is empowering. She is aware that she cannot appeal to Hugh within the terms of the feminine ideal--through physical beauty and childlike helplessness--the way her apparent rival, Janey, can. Prior to the theft, Deb had perceived herself as belonging to a sub-human realm in which her only role was that of a worthless servant faithfully and mutely bringing Hugh his dinner while ignoring her own hunger and exhaustion. (If the able bodied, middle-class reader also sees in this portrait a slightly exaggerated reflection of the role women were expected to serve, especially among the working class,

as wives, mothers, and workers, it is, I think, no accident.) Through the witch dwarf fantasy, Davis shows us that the only other self-construction available to Deb was that of a magical being, resident of a non-human, fairy tale realm. Such a being, while enjoying no benefits of her own, could serve as an instrument for lifting Hugh out of his real world and into the apparently magical world inhabited by Mitchell and his like. Through this scene, Davis shows us that story-making is not an activity of the privileged alone. To escape from the hopelessness of her and Hugh's condition, Deb constructs a fairy tale in which Hugh becomes king, Janey is the sleeping princess, and she is the magical witch dwarf.

Towards the end of the story, as Hugh lies dead in his jail cell, Deb is seen and read from yet another perspective, this time by the Quaker lady who arrives to prepare Hugh's body for burial. The Quaker's perception of Deborah and Hugh is given the most credibility in the story. She comes to the jail on a mission of mercy; described as "a homely body"--a phrase that suggests an element of unpretentious honesty grounded in the body--she is, for the most part, silent. Unlike the narrator, who relies on words for communication, the Quaker's acts of charity speak for her. Silently, she undertakes the interpretative act of understanding the meaning of both Hugh and Deborah. After laying out Hugh's body, the Quaker brings in a vase of "wood-leaves and berries" and opens the cell window. In response to Deb's question about whether she had known Hugh, she responds simply, "'I know Hugh now'" (62). We trust the accuracy of her "reading" for, simply from observing his dead body, she is able to understand his longing for the countryside. She also intuitively perceives the inherent good in Deb's character, despite her appearance to the contrary: "She watched them all--sitting on the end of the pallet, holding his head in her arms--with the ferocity of a watch-dog, if any of them touched the body. There was no meekness, or sorrow, in her face; the stuff out of which murderers are made, instead" (61). The act of interpreting visual signs and offering genuine comfort is described precisely by the narrator as Deb sits in her jail cell looking at the hills beyond the milltown: "As she looked, a shadow of their solemn repose fell on her face: its fierce discontent faded into a pitiful, humble quiet. Slow, solemn tears gathered in her eyes. . . . The Quaker watched her keenly. She came to her at last, and touched her arm" (63).

This moment of silent empathetic understanding quickly passes, however, as convention once again colors the narrator's account of the events that follow. When the Quaker offers to take Deb into the Quaker community after her prison sentence has passed, we already know what to expect. And the narrator knows that we know, as she piously says, "There is no need to tire you with the long years of sunshine, and fresh air, and slow, patient Christ-love, needed to make healthy and hopeful this impure body and soul" (63). The spiritual transcendence of the corrupt body through Christian grace was a cultural and literary tradition firmly established in nineteenth-century America, and Davis could assume we would anticipate Deb's transformation into sainthood as surely as we understood her earlier construction as a romantic heroine. But, just to make sure we do not misread the cultural context of Deb's new-found saintliness, Davis has her narrator (not the Quaker) paint a final elaborately sentimental picture of an aged Deborah in the bosom of the church:

There is a homely pine house, on one of these hills, whose windows overlook broad, wooded slopes and clover-crimsoned meadows,--nched into the very place where the light is warmest, the air freest. It is the Friends' meeting-house. Once a week they sit there, in their grave, earnest way, waiting for the Spirit of Love to speak, opening their simple hearts to receive His words. There is a woman, old, deformed, who takes a humble place among them: waiting like them: in her gray dress, her worn face, pure and meek, turned now and then to the sky. A woman much loved by these silent, restful people; more silent than they, more humble, more loving. (63-4)

From the story's outset, Davis explicitly tells us that she is presenting the hunchback Deborah as a figure to be read. She then provides us with three alternative readings drawn from at least three literary traditions, each with its distinct language: within the middle-class American sentimental novel, Deborah is a romantic heroine; within the European peasant folktale, she is a supernatural witch dwarf; and within the Christian salvation narrative, she is a redeemed soul. The deformed figure of Deborah cannot be reduced to a

simple signification of meaning because the various readings articulated in the text are themselves distinctly colored by different cultural constructions.

The deformity of Deborah's body is the result of things done to her, caused by social circumstances, and beyond her control. Although her body serves as a sign to be read, she is not able to generate her own signs. Throughout the story, and even in the end after she is "saved" by the Quakers, Deb is characterized by her silence. The only exception is her story of the witch dwarf. Hugh Wolfe is a different type completely. Although, like Deb and the others in his class, Hugh is unable to express adequately his feelings through language, he attempts to transcend his verbal muteness through the creation of sculptures hacked out of the korl that is the waste product of iron he literally has spent his life producing. In his obsession with the korl, Hugh embodies the artist's passion for self-expression and his need to be understood. When it becomes clear that his sculptures are ignored, mocked, and misinterpreted even by those he had hoped could understand his meaning, Hugh turns his own body into a grotesque work of art in a final attempt to communicate the truth of his existence.

Just as Deb is a figure of deformity, Hugh is the artist who creates figures of deformity: the "rough, ungainly" korl woman and, in the end, his own mutilated body. But Davis has given Hugh another inherent quality, as a correlative to the social deviance he experiences as a creative artist, that determines his essential nature and contributes to the tragedy of his life. This quality is revealed near the beginning of the story, when Davis shows Hugh caught simultaneously in the gaze of Deb, who lay on the ashheap and "watched him as a spaniel its master," and of the narrator, who has just promised to "paint . . . the outlines of a night, a crisis in the life of one man" (23). By focusing on Hugh's physical body, his cultural behavior, and the way he is viewed by his peers, the narrator puts her description in a specifically gendered context within which Hugh is presented as outside the norm:

Physically, Nature has promised the man but little. He has already lost the strength and instinct vigor of a man, his muscles were thin, his nerves weak, his face (a meek, woman's face) haggard, yellow with consumption. In the mill he was known as one of the girl-men: "Molly Wolfe" was his sobriquet. He was

never seen in the cockpit, did not own a terrier, drank but seldom; when he did, desperately. He fought sometimes, but was always thrashed, pommelled to a jelly. The man was game enough, when his blood was up: but he was no favorite in the mill; he had the taint of school-learning on him,--not to a dangerous extent, only a quarter or so in the free-school in fact, but enough to ruin him as a good hand in a fight. (23-4; emphasis added)

In short, Hugh Wolfe is seen by his peers as effeminate, not much of a man. What is surprising to the modern reader is that Davis lets us know specifically what that meant to his fellow workers in sexual terms. The epithets "girl-man" and "Molly" would have been similar to "faggot" and "fairy" today. It is not just that Hugh is not one of the guys; his failure to fit in with norms of appropriate gendered behavior peg him as a sexual deviant, as what would soon be called a homosexual. Inasmuch as sexual deviance would have been seen as physical as well as emotional by the second half of the nineteenth century, Hugh's effeminacy is Davis's way of constructing another type of deformity.

Given the explicitness of the language used by Davis in the passage just quoted, it seems extraordinary that critics have not picked up on her allusions to homosexuality. Perhaps the major reason is the blinders that American critics seem to have worn during most of the homophobic twentieth century to any allusion to what has been defined as "deviant" sexuality in either the works or the lives of the authors they have studied.⁴⁴ More recently, although critics finally have begun to acknowledge the role of sexuality in general (including that between members of the same sex) in the creation and

⁴⁴ Anyone studying American literature prior to the last decade has confronted resistance to recognizing or commenting upon the homosexuality, or even the non-heterosexuality, of major American writers such as Whitman, Dickinson, Cather, and Stein. There are now numerous studies regarding this historical denial of homosexuality and lesbianism, especially in American literary criticism. Among the earliest and most influential of these are Blanche Wiesen Cook's "The Historical Denial of Lesbianism" (1979) and "Women Alone Stir My Imagination: Lesbianism and the Cultural Tradition" (1979), and Bonnie Zimmerman's "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism" (1981), as well as recent critical studies and biographies of key figures that introduce information or speculation regarding their sexuality, such as Sharon O'Brien's Willa Cather (1987).

understanding of literature, interpretations of texts and biographical material have been hampered by considerable confusion about the evolution of cultural understandings of homosexuality during relatively modern times. New research in the history of sexuality is beginning to yield clarifications but we still lack a reliable body of knowledge which we can bring to bear on the interpretation of specific texts and lives.

A clear understanding of the situation in 1860, when "Life in the Iron Mills" was written, is especially difficult to reconstruct. Some historians, following the lead of Michel Foucault, have placed the cultural construction of homosexuality in the late nineteenth century when the medical profession succeeded in not only medicalizing homosexuality but criminalizing it as well.⁴⁵ According to these interpretations, prior to the theories of the so-called sexologists of the late nineteenth century, sexual acts between members of the same sex had been understood to constitute deviant behavior that, although sinful, could be performed by anyone. These historians believe that around the turn of the century deviant sexuality began to be associated with the individual committing the act rather than with the sexual act itself, as new medical and psychological theories constructed the figure of the homosexual as a biologically specific kind of person, physically as well as psychologically distinguishable from those who followed the heterosexual norm. While there is historical support for this view of the construction of the homosexual as a type of being, interpretations of the meaning of these changing definitions have tended to be overly simplistic when used to deny the existence of any type of person prior to the late nineteenth century whose sexuality was generally understood by society to be deviant. Moreover, it is impossible to be very precise about when these shifts began to be expressed in ways that were accessible to different classes of people. Rather than illuminating our understanding of the past, an overemphasis on the contributions of the sexologists has tended to blind us to literary evidence of homosexuality in works written before the twentieth century.

⁴⁵ Foucault's position is found in *Histoire de la sexualite* (1976). Other influential studies are Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the 19th Century to the Present* (1977) and Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Man* (1981). The term "homosexuality" was first coined in 1869 and entered the English language in 1892. The term "heterosexuality," used to define the norm, came into use a few years later.

Although one school of historians has tended to deny the existence of homosexuals prior to the sexologists' construction, others have demonstrated that although the medicalization of homosexuality did not come until the second half of the nineteenth century, the identification of a type of man whose sexual passivity was associated with deviance goes at least as far back as classical Greece. For the Greeks, although it was acceptable for an adult male citizen to assume an aggressive sexual position with either a woman or a boy, it was unacceptable for an adult male to assume or desire the passive position. Those men who did were considered effeminate and were known as "malthakoi," or "molles" in the Latin translation.⁴⁶ Recent historical studies have also provided evidence of the existence of a well-defined homosexual subculture in London during the period 1660-1750.⁴⁷ Personal accounts and trial records provide documentation that clubs of middle- and lower-class men interested in homosexual activity gathered in taverns known as "molly-houses" where they engaged in "kissing, hugging, and making love (as they called it)," according to the testimony of one trial witness (Trumbach 138). These mollies, as they were called, typically assumed women's names and often dressed as women. One contemporary observer, Edward Ward, wrote in 1709, "They adopt all the small vanities natural to the feminine sex to such an extent that they try to speak, walk, chatter, shriek and scold as women do, aping them as well in other respects" (Greenberg 332). On the basis of this information, we can, with certainty, place the development of a specific

⁴⁶ The debate regarding the nature of Greek sexuality is best representing in John Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality (1980), who argues that homosexuality existed in the Western tradition dating back to the Greeks, and David Halperin, One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love (1989), who maintains that the concept of homosexuality is a modern one. Both scholars cite the Latin term "molles" or "mollis," although they disagree on its meaning. Halperin references a mid-fifth century A.D. Latin translation by Caelius Aurelianus of a largely lost work on chronic diseases by the Greek physician Soranus in which is discussed the phenomenon of unnatural men, known as "molles," who prefer the receptive role in sex with men (22-24). Boswell notes that the Latin word "mollis," meaning "soft," was often used as a term of derogation, although he questions whether it was a clear reference to effeminacy (76).

⁴⁷ See Randolph Trumbach, "Birth of the Queen: Sodomy and the Emergence of Gender Equality in Modern Culture, 1660-1750" (1977) and "Gender and the Homosexual Role in Modern Western Culture: The 18th and 19th Centuries Compared" (1987). Also Daniel Greenberg, The Construction of Homosexuality (1988). Trumbach argues that the term "molly" comes from the term for a female prostitute, rather than from Greek or Latin sources.

homosexual identity as occurring well before the late nineteenth century. As Daniel Greenberg states, "the diversity of eighteenth-century perceptions shows that it was a period of cognitive transition" during which some "began to see effeminacy and homosexuality as defining a distinct type of person whose sexual orientation was fairly stable, and whose distinguishing essence was determined in some way by factors outside his own control" (337). Although there was controversy throughout the nineteenth century about the characteristics of this type of person, as well as whether he had control over his deviance or was born with it, there is evidence that he was seen to exist as a type that deviated from the heterosexual norm. A homosexual underground, similar to London's molly subculture, has been documented as existing in New York City as early as the 1830's (Greenberg 355).

Given this background, it is clearly not sufficient to read the description of Hugh Wolfe as merely a vague reference to effeminacy. Davis's use of the sobriquet "Molly" makes a clear connection with a homosexual subculture in which effeminate men were known as mollies. Her description of Hugh as having a "woman's face," her explicit reference to the view of his male peers that he was "one of the girl-men," and her description of his lack of interest in "male" activities are too explicit to dismiss. All suggest that Davis was familiar with the language of homosexuality and able to use it as a way of describing her main character that she assumed would be understood by her reader. This would suggest that Davis had some knowledge of either the social phenomenon of a homosexual subculture or of the medical debate that was beginning to develop regarding the nature and origins of homosexual behavior. That the latter may have been the case is supported by her specific identification of her fictional guest as an "amateur psychologist," a designation that may have been a specific reference to new studies of deviant sexuality.

But what, it is fair to ask, are the implications of this description? What did it mean to Davis to characterize her protagonist as an artist of the deformed who is himself sexually deviant? In part, the answers are found in an anti-intellectual, anti-aesthetic American tradition which perceived the role of the artist as fundamentally unmanly. This inhospitable view of art was a favorite topic of Nathaniel Hawthorne whose writings, as I have

already noted, Davis knew and admired. By presenting Hugh as an artist of the deformed, Davis paid homage to the older writer, whose "artist of the beautiful," Owen Warfield, can be seen as a model for Hugh Wolfe.⁴⁸ Both Hugh and Owen are depicted as misfit artists whose character, vocation, and aspirations separate them from the community in which they live and expose them to the ridicule of other men. Both are obsessed with creating objects of art that are expressive of their inner natures, yet both are tragically misinterpreted by those who constitute the only audience to which they have access. Even the vision Davis describes of Hugh working in the iron mills is suggestive of what might have happened if Owen had been forced to work in Robert Danforth's blacksmith shop. Davis, however, went further than Hawthorne in using sexual deviance as a correlative to the social deviance experienced by the authentic creative artist. Hugh Wolfe is not just unpopular with the other men because he is a molly and a girl-man, but also because he is an artist:

Not one of themselves, they felt that, though outwardly as filthy and ash-covered; silent, with foreign thoughts and longings breaking out through his quietness in innumerable curious ways: this one, for instance.⁴⁹ In the neighboring furnace-buildings lay great heaps of the refuse from the ore after the pig-metal is run. Korl we call it here: a light, porous substance, of a delicate, waxen, flesh-colored tinge. Out of the blocks of this korl, Wolfe, in his off-hours from the furnace, had a habit of chipping and moulding figures,--hideous, fantastic enough, but

⁴⁸ Davis writes in Bits of Gossip about first encountering as a child two unsigned stories that greatly impressed in a collection entitled Moral Tales. She then goes on to suggest that she did not read Twice-Told Tales and discover the name of the author until after "Life in the Iron Mills" was published. This account is accepted without question by Rose (23). It can hardly be the case, however, that a well-educated and literary woman was not familiar with the works of Hawthorne until she was thirty, and I am inclined to think that Davis bent the facts a bit in her memoirs in order to improve the story. Consequently, I am willing to make an assumption that she had read "The Artist of the Beautiful" in Mosses From an Old Manse published in 1846. Sharon M. Harris also recognizes a connection with this story, but her interpretation is very different from mine, as I detail later in this chapter.

⁴⁹ Although Davis's language is, like Hugh's sculptures, often rough and ungainly, the awkwardness of this sentence suggests that a word or phrase might have been dropped when the story was printed in the Atlantic.

sometimes strangely beautiful: even the mill-men saw that, while they jeered at him. It was a curious fancy in the man, almost a passion. The few hours for rest he spent hewing and hacking with his blunt knife, never speaking, until his watch came again,--working at one figure for months, and, when it was finished, breaking it to pieces perhaps, in a fit of disappointment. A morbid, gloomy man, untaught, unled, left to feed his soul in grossness and crime, and hard, grinding labor. (24-5)

As the protagonist of this story that claims to be about "life in the iron mills," Hugh Wolfe is far from being, as Doctor May says of his sculpture, "the very type of [his] class" (32). He is instead, like Owen Warfield, a rendering of the artist as a deviant who does not fit into the gender or class determined norms his society has dictated for him. Moreover, as a man whose aspirations place him outside the world of his social and economic peers, Hugh Wolfe is an artist who has no audience, no one to view his work with an understanding eye. He creates his korl sculptures in isolation. The men he works with are able only to mock him for what seems to them like a waste of time spent in an unmanly activity. His cousin, Deborah, has no comprehension of what he is trying to do or say.

Wolfe's isolation changes, however, when, in the core episode of the story, he encounters the man named Mitchell. Of all the visitors brought by the overseer to observe the men at work at the furnaces, Mitchell is the most attentive to his surroundings. However, his perceptions are all colored by his class status and cultural preconceptions, as seen by the fact that nearly everything Mitchell says involves some kind of literary reference. For example, before taking notice of Wolfe, he tells young Kirby that his father's works "look like Dante's inferno," an insight which causes the young man to look "curiously around, as if seeing the faces of his hands for the first time" (27). But despite his cultural pretensions, Mitchell is especially fascinated with the bodies of the men. "[He] sat with an amused light in his cool gray eye, surveying critically the half-clothed figures of the puddlers, and the slow swing of their brawny muscles . . . He was an amateur gymnast,--hence his anatomical eye" (29). Mitchell lets his imagination transform the reality of the hard-working men into a nightmarish fantasy as he tells young Kirby: "One

could fancy these red smouldering lights to be the half-shut eyes of wild beasts, and the spectral figures their victims in the den" (31). While Mitchell is engaged in surveying the bodies of the men around him, Wolfe is just as focused on gazing at Mitchell. At first, "Wolfe caught with a quick pleasure the contour of the white hand." Then, he compares himself to this man of wealth, "Glancing now and then at Mitchell, marking acutely every smallest sign of refinement, then back to himself, seeing as in a mirror his filthy body, his more stained soul" (29-30). In a sequence of gazes, Wolfe admires the refinement of Mitchell's body, while Mitchell surveys the muscular bodies of the working men.

It is Mitchell who first sees the korl woman sculpture: "Mitchell started back, half-frightened, as, suddenly turning a corner, the white figure of a woman faced him in the darkness,--a woman, white, of giant proportions, crouching on the ground, her arms flung out in some wild gesture of warning" (31). As he examines the work more carefully he observes:

There was not one line of beauty or grace in it: a nude woman's form, muscular, grown coarse with labor, the powerful limbs instinct with some one poignant longing. One idea: there it was in the tense, rigid muscles, the clutching hands, the wild, eager face, like that of a starving wolf's. . . . Mitchell stood aloof, silent. The figure touched him strangely. (32)

Through the figure of the korl woman, a silent bond is created between these two men from different backgrounds. Mitchell intuitively identifies Wolfe as the man who made the crude sculpture. Alone among the men who have seen the korl woman--the working-class puddlers who have mocked it and the wealthy visitors who misinterpret it--Mitchell seems to understand the pain and longing that Wolfe had tried to express.

All through this central episode, Davis repeatedly suggests that a special connection exists between Wolfe and Mitchell that is shared by no one else in the story, not even by Deborah. For reasons that seem veiled in secrecy, the two men are linked by a recognition of a kinship that almost transcends their class differences. It would appear that Wolfe has finally found someone able to see his inner soul and speak for him. When he is directly asked to

explain the meaning of the korl woman and cannot find words to express his feelings, he silently appeals to Mitchell, "who saw the soul of the thing, he knew," and Mitchell helps him by speaking for both the artist and his sculpture: "It asks questions of God, and says 'I have a right to know,'" Mitchell informs his fellow visitors (33-34). For a brief moment, Wolfe has the experience of being understood by another through his work, of expressing his own longing in a way that could be recognized by another human being.

Yet, despite the silent understanding that appears to have passed between the two men, Mitchell cannot or will not sustain the connection. Having briefly dropped his ironic outlook for a moment of authentic emotion, he quickly recovers himself and resumes the "air of an amused spectator," who "looked at the furnace-tender as he had looked at a rare mosaic in the morning; only the man was the more amusing study of the two."⁵⁰ To signify his efforts to distance himself from Wolfe, he resumes speaking to his peers in language sprinkled with French and Latin phrases that could not be understood by the uneducated puddler, an affectation also used, incidentally, by the narrator in the opening frame. Nevertheless, when the party leaves the mill, with Doctor May pontificating about rights and the young Kirby condescendingly throwing Deborah some money, another moment of silent communion occurs between the two men: "Mitchell had simply touched his hat, as to an equal, with a quiet look of thorough recognition" (39).

The cumulative effect of the repeated exchanges of stares and gazes that pass between Wolfe and Mitchell is one that can certainly be read as intensely homoerotic. Whether intentionally or not, Davis has presented the reader with a scene that is fraught with sexual tension as well as with class conflict. Although she may not have been fully aware of the implications of what she was writing, the use of the mutually exchanged gaze to signal sexual interest between men is found in literary works by her contemporaries, providing her with models for this type of interaction. The most notable and widely read

⁵⁰ It is notable that Mitchell views Wolfe as if he were the work of art, the physical being whose function is to be an object of study, rather than his sculpture. In a sense, the narrator and, by extension, Davis herself are doing the same thing.

depiction of the homoerotic gaze is found in Whitman's Calamus poems, which were first published in 1860, in which the poet writes of "frequent and swift flash of eyes offering me love" (92). Robert K. Martin also has cited examples of what today would be called "cruising" in the works of Theodore Winthrop and Bayard Taylor, who published novels and travel literature in the 1860's and 1870's.⁵¹ In the exchange of eye contact between the wealthy, sophisticated outsider, Mitchell, and the weak, oppressed working-class artist, Hugh Wolfe, a fascination builds that is based upon the desire of each man for the Other and the recognition that this desire is shared.

The events that follow are the direct consequence of this emotional encounter between Wolfe and Mitchell. To call them tragic is to impose another literary tradition on the text; nonetheless, Wolfe's rapid descent from being an artist to becoming a self-destructing work of art seems to convey an essential inevitability of tragedy that goes beyond class. Wolfe's decision to passively allow himself to become a criminal by keeping Mitchell's money and his ultimate suicide are acts that seem to follow inevitably from his steadily increasing self-loathing as he attempts to deal with his encounter with a man who had responded to him with both understanding and rejection. His consequential descent into despair is described in the metaphorical language of bodily deformity. Even though he is not physically deformed the way Deborah is, Wolfe sees his body as deformed when he compares himself to the physical beauty he sees in Mitchell. Recalling Mitchell's "pure face, the delicate, sinewy limbs, in harmony with all he knew of beauty or truth," Wolfe then "looked at himself with sudden loathing, sick, wrung his hands with a cry, and then was silent" (40). Seeing in Mitchell an image of the perfection he himself had strived to attain, his realization that he is physically unable to achieve his own vision leaves him with despair and revulsion. In a moment of remorse and loathing, he likens himself not to the manly Mitchell, but to the deformed Deborah, "seeing her hunchback shape writhing with sobs" (41). Later, as Wolfe sits "on a broken cart-wheel," struggling to decide whether to keep the money Deb had stolen from

⁵¹ "Knights-Errant and Gothic Seducers: The Representation of Male Friendship in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America," Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (1990).

Mitchell, the narrator describes his brain as "greedy, dwarfed, full of thwarted energy and unused powers." As the narrator tries to justify Wolfe's criminal behavior, she ironically points to his "deafness" and to the "mote in his eye," which led him to believe that "a true life was one of full development rather than self-restraint" (46). Even the unthinking though sympathetic words of the jailor reinforce an image of deformity, as he recounts that he "never saw a man so cut down in my life" (51).

In the jail cell, Hugh Wolfe no longer has access to even the korl with which to express himself. All he has is his own broken body. The night after the trial, we are told that Wolfe was visited for an hour by Mitchell. Although the nature of their communion is intentionally left mysterious, its effects are not, for after Mitchell left him again, Wolfe lay bleeding from the lungs and "weak as a cat" (52).⁵² With the marks of his despair etched on his face, only a few people, themselves among the marginalized, are able to accurately read their message. The last person to see Wolfe alive is a tall mulatto who, crossing the street laughing, looked up and "when she caught sight of the haggard face peering out through the bars, suddenly grew grave, and hurried by" (57).⁵³ Davis describes this encounter as one of mutual understanding, in which the mulatto reads the despair on Hugh's face, while Hugh is moved to carve the essence of hers, before he realizes that he has no korl to carve. In the end, having no other material with which to work, Wolfe turns himself into his final sculpture, mutilating his body with a piece of tin described by the narrator as "not fit to cut korl with" (57). Ironically, the last words he hears are the jailor's order to be quiet.⁵⁴

⁵² Although it can hardly be intentional, the description of Wolfe suggests a person who has been raped.

⁵³ The racially-mixed mulatto woman plays an important role in "Life in the Iron Mill" as another version of the individual whose physical body places her on the margins of society. A mulatto is the first speaking voice in the story, urging Deborah to attend a dance, as well as the last human being to interact with Hugh. Later in this chapter, I examine the deformed mulatto, Lois Yare, who plays a central role in Davis's next work, Margret Howth.

⁵⁴ In her essay, "'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity" (1981), Susan Gubar comments on a similar act of self-destruction as an act of artistic creativity in Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth (1905). She writes of Lily Bart, "Having turned herself into an artistic object, she now literally kills herself into art" (Showalter 298).

Wolfe's final work of art, his own dead body, is finally perceived and understood by the Quaker lady who comes to dress his corpse, and who offers a home and spiritual salvation to Deborah. But despite this hopeful scene, the story told by the narrator of "Life in the Iron Mills" ends with emotional and philosophical ambivalence. Meaning hangs suspended between the conflicting images of the self-mutilated, dead body of Hugh Wolfe and the deformed but transcendent Deborah.

The story ends, however, not with the death of Hugh or even with the aged Deborah, but with the narrator in her home. Unlike the beginning frame, where we are introduced to the narrator on a bleak afternoon as she exhorts her visitor to go imaginatively with her into the streets to observe the life of the commonplace, it is now late in the evening and the narrator is alone at her desk struggling to understand the meaning of the kohl woman she keeps hidden behind a curtain in the corner of her library because "it is such a rough, ungainly thing." Readers have been confused by the meaning of this ending. Having mistakenly conflated the narrator and the author, and therefore having incorrectly assumed an identification between the narrator and Hugh Wolfe, the narrator's prim rejection of the kohl woman may seem contradictory to our experience of the story. Given the romantic sensibility we have learned to associate with the narrator, we should not be surprised, of course, to learn that she finds the figure disturbing. But despite her discomfort, she is unable to reject it completely, for she is strangely moved by "a bare arm stretched out imploringly" and "an eager, wolfish face watching mine: a wan, woful face, through which the spirit of the dead kohl-cutter looks out" (64).⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Another aspect of the kohl woman warrants mention. Unlike Spofford and Gilman, Davis did not give her deformed figure a racial identity in this story. However, she did make a curious connection between the kohl woman and the highly racialized and sexualized figure of the Hottentot. In a letter to her publisher, James Fields, regarding the story's title, Davis made the following extraordinary comment: "How would 'The Kohl Woman' do? I would be sure to read an article with that caption in the hope of discovering some new race of Hottentots [sic] perhaps" (Harris 57). Davis's association of the kohl woman and the Hottentots suggests that she might have had the famous Hottentot Venus in mind when she conceived the kohl woman.

This direct confrontation with the korl woman in the final frame presents an extraordinary and crucial moment in the narrative. As the narrator gazes upon the face of the sculpture, it becomes a mirror image that allows the previously hidden author to become visible and to merge with both the figure of the korl woman and woeful face of the dead korl-cutter. This moment is marked in the text at the beginning of the last paragraph by a shift from the narrator as speaker to the author as writer. In the place of the social scene in which the narrator tells her story to a visiting friend, the writer now sits alone in her study, writing the manuscript that we are engaged in reading. In this self-reflective moment we read: "The deep of the night is passing while I write" (64).⁵⁶ As the author raises her head from her desk and her confrontation with the imaginary faces of the korl woman and of Hugh Wolfe which she had created in her story, the gaslight reveals the objects actually surrounding her in her room: two ikons of the sentimental tradition ("a half-moulded child's head" and a figure of Aphrodite) and one symbol of a more natural, genuine art ("a bough of forest-leaves") (65). These objects also cause the reader to recall the "little broken figure of an angel pointing upward" which sat on the mantel when the story opened (12). Except for these symbols of art, the author is utterly and almost existentially alone in her dark library. This context gives an ironic cast to the author's final (mis)reading of the korl woman as a sign from God signifying "the promise of Dawn."⁵⁷

The moment of identification between the author/narrator, the korl woman, and Hugh Wolfe is crucial to grasping the full meaning of Davis's story, forcing us to grapple with understanding the nature of the relationship between Rebecca Harding Davis and the characters she has imagined. Many readers have assumed that Davis created Hugh Wolfe in her own image. Tillie Olsen's influential reading takes this position:

⁵⁶ Davis might have picked up this practice of shifting from narration to the voice of the narrator from Hawthorne, who used it frequently in his short stories as well as in his prefaces.

⁵⁷ This language connects the author/narrator to Mitchell who had said, after seeing the korl woman, that no one except the poor themselves can bring reform: "Some day, out of their bitter need will be thrown up their own light-bringer" (39).

[Harding] wrote in absolute identification with "thwarted, wasted lives . . . mighty hungers . . . unawakened power"; despised love; circumstances that denied use of capacities; imperfect, self-tutored art that could have only odd moments for its doing--as if these were her own. And they were, however differently embodied in the life of a daughter of the privileged class. (69)

Sharon M. Harris, on the other hand, counters this interpretation with a reading of Wolfe as a negative image of the artist, one soundly rejected by Davis:

Scholars have typically insisted that Hugh is Davis's representation of herself and her own thwarted artistic endeavors. Nothing could be further from Davis's intention. Instead, she attributes the destruction of the true artistic spirit to Hugh's acceptance of the capitalists' vision of Beauty when they visit the mill. . . . [Hugh's] potential is corrupted because he accepts the prevailing standard of Beauty. (36)

Harris supports her reading with a recognition of the relationship of Davis's story to Hawthorne's "Artist of the Beautiful," but she interprets this echo of Hawthorne as "a disparagement" of Hawthorne's story, held from "the perspective of a realist rather than of a romanticist" (36-7). Her assertion that Wolfe has mistakenly adopted "the capitalists' vision of Beauty" is based in large measure on what she assumes to be Hugh's rejection of Deborah. Harris interprets the statement, "there was that in her face and form which made him loathe the sight of her," as representing the unmediated "truth" about Wolfe's feelings and as establishing a clear separation between Wolfe and Davis who, she assumes, was sympathetic with Deborah's romantic longing for love. What I think Harris ignores is that this supposed "rejection" comes to us only through the self-loathing eyes of Deborah as she is imagined by the sentimental narrator who, as we have seen, has framed her story as a tale of unrequited love. From the narrator's perspective, Hugh's "groping passion for whatever was beautiful and pure" must also mean "that his soul sickened with disgust at [Deb's] deformity," as her own did (22-23). Because the narrator

believes that Deborah assumes this, and imagines that Hugh must be attracted to “the dark blue eyes and lithe figure of the little Irish girl she had left in the cellar,” she also believes that Deborah is consumed by passionate jealousy which causes her to steal Mitchell’s money for Hugh. But nowhere in the story are these assumptions substantiated by anything that Hugh himself says or does. The interactions between Hugh and Deborah we are shown indicate only compassion on his part, never disgust. All of Hugh’s feelings of loathing are reserved for himself. Nor do we ever see or hear any suggestion from Hugh that he secretly longs for Janey, or that he even contemplates being married; it is only Deborah and the narrator who make this assumption. The only longings we are shown in the story are Hugh’s passion for sculpting and his desire for Mitchell.

My own view of the relationship between Davis and the character of Hugh Wolfe differs from both Olsen’s and Harris’s. Olsen makes too great a leap from the author to her character. Reading the story as almost completely autobiographical, she allows no room for either subtlety or self-awareness on Davis’s part. Harris, on the other hand, is too ready to reject the palpable sympathy created in the story for its protagonist. She is especially wrong, I think, in interpreting Davis’s break with tradition as a rejection of Hawthorne. In making this connection, she is misled by genre definitions imposed by modern critics who have divided nineteenth-century literature into romance and realism. From a twentieth-century perspective, the former was best represented by Hawthorne, while Davis was one of the initiators of the latter. In reality, however, the division was not so clear. “Life in the Iron Mill” was written only a decade after The House of the Seven Gables, and its author sent the story to Hawthorne not as a gesture of contempt but in admiration. By consciously creating in Hugh Wolfe an artist who struggled with the kinds of issues she herself faced as an artist, Davis developed her own version of the artist of the beautiful.

Neither Hawthorne nor Davis, however, created identical images of themselves; their characters represent extreme projections of their deepest anxieties as artists. By attempting to capture the ideal of intangible beauty in the form of a mechanical butterfly, the effeminate misfit, Owen Warfield, parodies Hawthorne’s fears about his own artistic aspirations and limitations.

Similarly, by creating crude but realistic images of the deformities that constitute his experience of life, the sexually ambiguous factory worker, Hugh Wolfe, reflects Davis's own fears about her identity and her success as an artist.⁵⁸ However, unlike Hawthorne, whose character resembles him in significant ways, including gender, Davis created a male protagonist characterized by deviant sexuality to represent her fears as an artist and a woman. By depicting Wolfe as a man who is perceived by his peers as being sexually deviant, because his appearance, habits, and dreams differ from theirs, she was able to express her own anxieties as an unmarried woman aspiring to be a serious writer while disguising her fears about her own sexuality. Davis's identification with Hugh Wolfe indicates her sense of alienation from a society with rigid sex roles that saw any intellectual or artistic activity performed by a woman as unnatural, unwomanly, and hinting of sexual deviance.⁵⁹

I do not want to suggest that Davis followed uncritically in Hawthorne's literary footsteps. Despite her admiration for him, she included him among the "members of the 'Atlantic' coterie" about which she later wrote in *Bits of Gossip*: "while they thought they were guiding the real world, they stood quite outside of it, and never would see it as it was" (32-33). Yet it is not a far reach to imagine Davis's identification with the older writer as well as with her own working-class protagonist. It is not hard to imagine how Davis might have felt, as a woman aspiring to be a serious artist, living in a

⁵⁸ In one sense, Hawthorne and Davis chose to explore issues involving the artist and the creative process using characters who are what we would today call "outsider artists," individuals driven to create art who have no formal training--no artificial preconception of what constitutes beauty--and who create their art out of internal need or a conviction that they are obeying God's will. In the outsider tradition, Wolfe's sculptured pieces of kohl are authentic expressions of emotion rather than constructed simulations of a culturally-defined ideal. The sympathetic eye, the person able to appreciate real feeling rather than pretension, will value the emotional honesty of such work. But the products of the outside artist are often raw and crude. It is often not appreciated or understood either by members of the privileged classes who rely upon traditional cultural norms rather than emotional authenticity when making aesthetic judgements or by members of their own class whose poverty has left them unable to create a place in their lives for art.

⁵⁹ It is notable that Davis chose the name, Hugh, the given name of her grandfather and her brother, for her protagonist, suggesting a personal connection.

time and place where few could have understood her dreams. When she wrote of Hawthorne much later in her life that "he was an alien among these men, not of their kind," that "he walked through life, talking and thinking in a language which we do not understand," that he "wandered through the earth looking for his own people and never finding them," and when she recalled with unabashed pride his final words to her, "it seems as if we had known you always," it is easy to speculate that she may have been indirectly declaring her feelings of kinship with another alien like herself (55, 56, 64).

"Life in the Iron Mills" is, among other things, about how we all perceive and distort, understand and fail to understand, the lives of others. It is about how an artist can be made to feel like a social deviant--an alien--by being misunderstood by those around her, not only by those who are blind to her aspirations, but also by those who have the capacity but not the will to understand. It is about how misunderstanding can lead to self-loathing and even self-destruction. By showing the reader how various perceptions of Deborah and Hugh Wolfe were determined by individual cultural contexts and the limitations of each perspective, Davis was not claiming that their lives had no reality, but only that we distort that reality to the extent that our own preconceptions and cultural constructions keep us from perceiving the facts of life as they are presented to us. How then do we get at the truth of another person, especially those whose experiences are foreign to us? One answer Davis proposed in "Life in the Iron Mills" is that we can, like her narrator, imaginatively enter their lives through stories, even though those stories are distorted by our own limited view and the particular colors of our cultural lens. We can also, like the Quaker, quietly and unobtrusively enter into the lives of those we seek to understand by silently but compassionately reading the evidence inscribed on their faces and bodies. And, finally, we can try to understand the meaning of authentic works of art, like the kohl woman, created to express the emotional truth of the artist.

All of these possibilities are relevant to the work of the critic who would try to understand the life and meaning of a writer, like Davis, who lived in another time and place, under a set of circumstances we today can only enter through our informed imaginations. Some "truth" can come from all of them, but none are sufficient in themselves. Even if Davis intended to

create in Hugh Wolfe a character from another social world, having no resemblance to herself, we, as informed readers, would have to recognize the correlations between Wolfe and Davis as artists, as well as those between the kohl woman and "Life in the Iron Mills" as works of art. On the other hand, the distortions made by Davis's narrator in telling the story of Hugh Wolfe, even if unconscious on Davis's part, have to remind us that our own attempts to imagine the life and feelings of the author, Rebecca Harding Davis, will almost certainly be distorted by our own needs and preconceptions. Rather than be paralyzed between these apparently impossible positions, Davis tells us that an imaginative attempt motivated by compassion, even when it fails, is preferable to the lazy, detached curiosity of the amateur psychologist and to the cool, ironic stance of a man like Mitchell, whose education, knowledge of the classics, and mastery of foreign languages did nothing to compensate for his unwillingness to acknowledge publicly his emotional kinship with Hugh Wolfe. A reader like Tillie Olsen may have distorted her portrayal of Davis by projecting her own creative and personal issues onto her subject. She may even have gotten a number of important facts wrong.⁶⁰ But like Davis's narrator, Olsen not only was willing to make the attempt to bring Davis and her story to life, she also was responsible for recovering, from behind its curtain, the work that had been put away as too crude to be considered art, and to make that work accessible so that it could eventually speak for its author.

"Life in the Iron Mills" is a powerful expression of the pain and self-loathing of the artist who sees herself as a deviant in her society; who is driven, by the misunderstandings of others, to self-destruction; and whose strongest hope is that her work will survive to speak eventually for her. I believe that like her fictional artist, Hugh Wolfe, Davis saw herself as an artist

⁶⁰ Many of Olsen's errors of fact or interpretation have become embedded in the Davis myth. For example, she believed that "Life in the Iron Mills" was Davis's first published work, not being aware of her earlier journalistic writings and poems; she believed that "Life" was the first American story to deal with the grim realities of working class life, having no familiarity with the proletarian and reformist literature that preceded her; she mistakenly stated that Davis's brother tried to join the Secessionists, when it was the Union army he was talked out of joining; and she mistakenly attributed to Davis authorship of the reactionary, anti-feminist tract, *Pro Aris et Focis* (For Altar and Hearth), wrongly suggesting she was opposed to women's rights.

of the deformed, and that she used deformity (including Wolfe's sexual deviance), as a metaphor to express her deepest anxieties about herself and her work. "Life in the Iron Mills" has been viewed almost exclusively as an early example of realistic proletarian fiction whose primary objective, like an image by the nineteenth century photographer, Jacob Riis, is to show the lives of the poor to complacent middle-class Americans in the interest of social reform. We have seen that it is a very complex work which is, on the deepest level, not just about the lives of the poor at all, but also about the consequences of deviance for a white, middle-class woman writer.

Most critics agree that Davis failed to live up to the great promise shown in "Life in the Iron Mills," although assessments of the relative quality and importance of her subsequent works vary. Tillie Olsen, whose admiration for both Davis and "Life in the Iron Mills" seems almost to rest on the subsequent silencing of her genius, put it bluntly: "A scanty best of her work is close to the first rank; justifies resurrection, currency, fame. Even that best is botched" (155). Jean Fagan Yellin wrote of Davis: "she never fulfilled her early promise, and by 1909, when her last story appeared, had outlived her popularity" (278). Even Sharon M. Harris, who attempted in her revisionist critical biography to offer a reassessment of Davis's entire literary contribution, arguing that "it is time to afford Davis the honor due her" (10), is ultimately unable to change the perception that Davis wrote her best work at the beginning of her career, before she began to compromise her literary vision to meet the demands of popular tastes.

Davis scholars also generally agree that the first signs of Davis's creative decline are apparent in the second work she published in the Atlantic, the year following the appearance of "Life in the Iron Mills." According to Jean Fagan Yellin's reconstruction of the events surrounding the evolution of this work, Davis wrote to James Fields on April 11, 1861 that she had begun a story she called "The Deaf and the Dumb" which she offered for the June issue of the Atlantic. No manuscript of this original text has survived. However, Davis must have sent the story to Fields because in another letter, dated May 10, she responded to his request for a revision. Judging from her letter, it would appear that the objection Fields made to the story was that "it assembles the gloom too depressingly" (Olsen 89). Unable to

insist on the validity of her vision, Davis asked Fields for the opportunity to revise the piece so that, with the exception of one character, Lois Yare, she would render her picture "steeped in warm healthy light. A 'perfect day in June'" (288). By the end of July, Davis resubmitted a revised manuscript. What had begun as a story was now a full-length novel that was published in installments from October, 1861 to March, 1862 under the title "Margret Howth--A Story of To-Day."⁶¹

Margret Howth, which begins as a realistic depiction of dreary poverty, thwarted dreams, and inflated ambition, eventually becomes contrived and unbelievable, as it struggles to achieve a happy ending. The title character is the only daughter of a family that has seen better days and is now impoverished, mainly because of the increasing blindness of her intellectual father, a former schoolmaster. Because of the family's dire circumstances, Margret is forced to go to work as a bookkeeper in the local factory whose principle owner is her father's friend and intellectual adversary, Dr. Knowles, a part-Indian, grossly overweight, old man whose dream it is to found a utopian community based on principles of equality and celibacy. To get the money to put his plans into action, Knowles plans to sell his share of the factory to the young, ambitious Stephen Holmes, who is engaged to marry the daughter of the other partner in the factory, presumably for her father's money and social status. However, in earlier times, Holmes had been romantically involved with Margret, who continues to love him despite his rejection of her. Margret tries to resign herself to a single life, encouraged by Knowles who plans to mould her into a social reformer to serve as his assistant in carrying out his utopian dream. However, before Knowles's plans can be realized, the factory is intentionally burned to the ground by Joe Yare, a black factory worker, recently released from prison. Holmes, who slept at the factory, is nearly killed in the fire, but is saved and nursed back to health by Joe's daughter, Lois Yare, a deformed mulatto who is beloved by the whole community. Having faced death, Holmes finally realizes that he cannot let

⁶¹ Without surviving manuscripts, no one has yet determined at what stage the work was expanded. This reconstruction of the writing of Margret Howth is taken from Jean Fagan Yellin's "afterword" to the Feminist Press 1990 republication of the novel, pp. 287-90. I have also taken some details from Tillie Olsen's account in her 1972 essay, "A Biographical Interpretation."

ambition rule his emotions and he returns to his true love, Margret, willing to give up his dreams of wealth. Happily, it turns out, no such sacrifice is necessary; Margret becomes a rich woman herself when oil is discovered on her parent's land. As Margret and Holmes reunite, it appears that the heterosexual marriage plot has been fulfilled, albeit awkwardly. In the end, the people who suffer are Lois, who dies at the stroke of midnight as the New Year dawns, from the effects of having breathed toxic fumes during the factory fire, and Knowles, who has lost everything he once owned and whose dreams of reform have been shattered.

Even with only the bare bones of the plot just given, it is clear that Margret Howth is a seriously deformed text, so badly shaped as to be itself grotesque. In the absence of draft manuscripts, we cannot directly trace its development and so we cannot say with certainty whether it was born with a defect that increased as it grew or whether it came into its deformity as it tried to develop under adverse conditions. My own view is that the seeds of deformity were in Davis's work from the beginning and were, in a perverse way, nurtured by those who tried to help her. But even if we cannot, with certainty, trace the genesis or the causes of this particular book's defects, we can, by describing them, gain insight into what happened to a talented woman writer who tried to tell the truth of her own life.

In her afterword to the Feminist Press edition of Margret Howth, Jean Fagan Yellin presents a convincing analysis of the probable development of the story. She proposes that the crucial shift in the story occurs after chapter seven, breaking the eleven-chapter work into two uneven and inconsistent parts.⁶² Her argument rests on the following points. First, the first seven chapters express "an economy of scarcity" which conflicts with the affluence of the ending (292). Second, the narrative is transformed from one in which the narrator presents "a self-conscious critique of conventional fiction" to one in which Margret is transformed in "a stock heroine" and Holmes into "a traditional patriarchal hero" (292-93). Third, the caged chicken that provided an apt symbol during the first seven chapters is dropped during the final four.

⁶² The 1990 Feminist Press edition was the first reprint of Margret Howth since it was first published in book form by Ticknor and Fields in 1862.

Fourth, the literary references shift from the staple reading fare of ordinary life--the account book, the newspaper, and the Bible--to works that represent sentimental convention--Cinderella, the Arabian Nights, and Dickens's The Christmas Carol. Finally, Yellin points to the collapse of the chronological structure of the book, for while the first seven chapters describe the events of two days, October 2 and October 3, 1860, the final four chapters are organized around the traditional holidays of the Christmas season, ending on New Year's Day (295). These specific points all suggest that Davis probably revised her original text, especially after the current chapter seven, to give it the conventional happy ending requested by her publisher. Yellin concludes that "Margret Howth presents an important instance in which the leading member of the white male literary establishment required that a nineteenth-century woman writer 'feminize' her text" (297).

Yellin is at least partly right in attributing the structural flaws in Margret Howth to the insensitive demands of her publisher for a less gloomy, happier ending than Davis originally wrote, forcing her to revise completely the final third of her novel. However, a close reading of the entire work reveals that the origins of the text's deformity are more inherent than she suggests. Davis's problems as an artist were not caused by the interference of Fields. Her difficulties may have been exacerbated by the reactions of others, so that instead of developing her considerable talents, those who admired her inadvertently helped to stunt her artistic growth. But to a large extent, the deformity in Margret Howth is congenital, a reflection of Davis's perception of herself as an outsider whose way of life and writings would inevitably be challenged as not conforming with the expectations of her society.⁶³ Davis had reason to see herself as an outsider. As a woman writer with serious literary aspirations, she was engaged in a battle with the social and cultural mandates imposed by nineteenth-century America. Raised in a mill town in a border state, she was outside the cultural centers of either New England or New York, and so lacked the support that other women writers and artists might have accorded. Moreover, she had a particular reason at this time to

⁶³ Davis herself used the language of deformity in connection with her own texts. In a letter to Fields, accompanying one manuscript, she wrote: "Don't leave anything out of it in publishing it, deformity is better than a scar you know" (Harris 82).

contemplate her deviance as an unmarried woman. Although she had passed thirty at this point, and may have been reconciled to the prospect of a single life dedicated to writing, Clarke Davis's courtship, which he at first conducted only by mail and then by coming to visit her in person, probably had begun around this time, and doubtless raised questions in her mind as to the nature of her future course. It is problematic to speculate too specifically on what may have gone on in Davis's mind as she wrote her second work for the Atlantic, but any reader of Margret Howth must be struck by the pervasive anger of its author, and her alternatively confrontational and conciliatory stance towards her audience.

A sense of the author as engaged in a battle with those around her is apparent in the way Davis initially sets up her audience as an antagonist. As she had done earlier in "Life in the Iron Mills," the narrator/author of Margret Howth assumes her audience will have a hostile response to her material:

My story is very crude and homely, as I said,--only a rough sketch of one or two of those people whom you see every day, and call "dregs," sometimes--a dull, plain bit of prose, such as you might pick for yourself out of any of these warehouses or back-streets. I expect you to call it stale and plebeian, for I know the glimpses of life it pleases you best to find. (6)

However, the location of the enemy shifts only a few lines later as the narrator, now identifying with her reader by maintaining her use of the direct address, positions her "self" as the enemy and death as the victory:

Your enemy, Self, goes with you from the cradle to the coffin; it is a hand-to-hand struggle all the sad, slow way, fought in solitude,--a battle that began with the first heart-beat, and whose victory will come only when the drops ooze out, and suddenly halt in the veins,--a victory, if you can gain it, that will drift you not a little way upon the coasts of the wider, stronger range of being, beyond death. (emphasis added, 7)

By using the image of blood dripping from veins as a metaphor for her personal sense of artistic isolation and intense inner struggle, Davis links herself and her reader to Hugh Wolfe whose self-mutilation caused his death as the blood oozed out drop by drop. If, as we saw, Wolfe is an artist of deformity, it is as if Davis were here declaring the same role for herself and anticipating her own self-destruction as an artist.

What I mean to show is that the real meaning of Margret Howth is contained in its own deformity. Setting aside, as we must, speculations about the work that might have been had Fields not requested a rewriting with a happy ending, the work that lies before us is defined by its flaws. Moreover, whether consciously or not, Davis expressed the deformity of her text in the recurrent images of deformity that are a tangible presence throughout Margret Howth. Davis loaded her story from its start with evocative metaphors of mutilation and disfigurement, spoken by the narrator as well as by other characters. Moreover, the characters who carry the burden of the text's meaning are themselves defined by their deformities. Lois Yare and Doctor Knowles are both grotesquely misshapen as well as being racially marked, one as an African-American mulatto and the other as part-American Indian. Although both are secondary characters, when viewed strictly from the standpoint of plot, together they provide the text with its center of gravity because of their thematic importance, emotional weight, and unique connection to the novel's title character. Like the grotesque but nearly overlooked figures of the black dwarf and the little mad woman in Spofford's stories, Yare and Knowles have been misread and underread by the relatively few critics who have written about Margret Howth, largely because the meaning of their deformities has not been understood. Together they express and reveal the personal and artistic struggles of their white, middle-class, able-bodied, but female creator.

Despite her insignificance in the development of the story's events, Lois Yare is arguably the most important person in the book. She is also the only character Davis refused to change in order to please her publisher. In her letter to Fields, responding to his criticism of the first version of the story, Davis claimed that in her original plan Lois's "life and death were to be the only dark thread" and she asked to be allowed to "let her character and death

(I cannot give up all, you see) remain, and the rest of the picture be seeped in warm healthy light" (Yellin 288). Davis's image of Lois as the dark thread that runs through the text is appropriate on many levels. As a mulatto, whose father had been a slave, she is literally dark, having "the taint in her veins of black blood" (56). Moreover, as a pathetic figure who is doomed by circumstances and the actions of people she cannot control, the story of her life and death provides the most intensely tragic chord in the novel. Finally, although she plays no active role in the plot, she is the character whose presence holds the story together; as an itinerant "huckster," she is known and loved by all the other characters, and serves as a bond between those who are estranged from each other.

All of the darkness, as well as the hope, represented by Lois is embodied in her physical deformity. Lois Yare is, in fact, one of the most deformed characters in nineteenth-century American literature. When she first appears in the second chapter, she is described as "helplessly crippled" and dwarfed: "she scarcely came up to the level of the wheel; some deformity of her legs made her walk with a curious rolling jerk, very comical to see." Even the cart she sits on and the donkey that drew it embody deformity. The "home-made" cart is "patched up with wicker-work and bits of board," "piled up with baskets of vegetables, eggs, and chickens," with "a broken bench," reins of "twisted rope," "uneven wheels." The donkey is "bony and blind" (53). Yet, Lois's face and character seem to be in contrast to her bodily form: "The face would have startled you on so old and stunted a body. It was a child's face, quick, eager, with that pitiful beauty you always see in deformed people" (55-56). When she is again described a few pages later, additional details of her deformity seem to be almost indiscriminately added on. Davis describes "the distorted little body," "her weak brain," "a dumb, hungry look in her eyes," her "broad, misshapen forehead," "ruin that had eaten into her brain," "tainted blood in her veins of centuries of slavery and heathenism struggling to drag her down," "her scarred face," "her marred senses," "latent powers in her distorted brain," her "disjointed talk," and "the foul fragments of her brain" (68-77).

This effusion of imagery suggests that a powerful meaning is located in the subtext of the novel. On the surface, Lois's deformities may be explained

as the visible consequence of the abysmal conditions of the factories and the degraded lives of the poor, especially of the recently freed former slaves of the southern and border states. On a deeper level, however, Lois Yare is a tragic figure who serves as a virtual container for images of deformity and as a symbolic representation of the deviant who occupies a place outside the boundaries of "normal" society. Although Lois is loved by all, she is completely alone, with no hope for a "normal" life, no chance of marriage, and no family other than her renegade father, Joe. Her poverty, ambiguous race, and abnormal body, along with her extraordinary spirit, place her in a separate category from the other characters in the story.

Although Lois is existentially alone as the result of class, racial, and physical deviance, she is invisibly bound to the title character and principle protagonist, Margret Howth (and, by extension, to the author/narrator). Lois's role as a deformed double for Margret is expressed in a number of ways: by detailed descriptions of her and Margret that are placed immediately adjacent to each other; by the use of similar descriptive images to characterize both women; and, most explicitly, by Margret's direct expressions of her sense of kinship with Lois.

Davis establishes a connection between Lois and Margret from the outset when she first introduces the deformed mulatto at the end of chapter two as she arrives at the Howth farm on the evening of October 2, 1860. Margret has just returned to the farm from her first day of work at the factory, and her father and Dr. Knowles are in the parlor discussing politics, when Lois arrives in her broken-down cart selling vegetables. A detailed description of Lois's physical state accompanies her introduction. Because the hour is late, she spends the night in the barn, rather than continuing on her way to town. When chapter three opens the next morning, the narrator returns her focus upon her protagonist, Margret, who has awakened in a state that would be diagnosed today as serious depression, characterized by physical inertia, feelings of emotional and sexual repression, and extreme self-loathing. The imagery previously used to describe the physically deformed Lois is mirrored by the imagery in the following passage describing the emotionally repressed Margret:

She was worn out. . . . A wild sickening sense of what might have been struggled up; she thrust it down . . . a bitter laugh came on her face, as she looked into the glass, and saw the dead, dull eyes, and the wrinkle in her forehead. . . . She scorned herself for the moment, grew sick of herself, balked, thwarted in her true life as she was. . . . She loathed herself as one whom God had thought unworthy of every woman's right,--to love and be loved. . . . Any one with keen analytic eye, noting the thin muscles of this woman, the protruding brain, the eyes deep, concealing, would have foretold that she would conquer in the fight; force her soul down,--but that the forcing down would leave the weak, flaccid body spent and dead. (59-60)

These metaphoric links are repeated, in various forms, throughout the first few chapters of the novel. But if Lois's deformity is the result of the unhealthy conditions of the factory, the language used to describe Margret's deformity suggests that it is at least partly due to her rejection of a traditional female role. Margret's protruding brain and her weak, flaccid, and spent body, are signs that she has deformed herself through the overdevelopment of her intellect, and the repression of her sexuality and her procreative function. The language used by Davis echoes the familiar warnings of the nineteenth-century medical profession that women who repress their reproductive role, especially by developing their intellectual powers, do so at the expense of their bodies. In addition to communicating Margret's exaggerated sense of disease and self-loathing, this passage suggests that its cause lay in her deviance, whether completely voluntary or partially imposed, from a normal life centered on heterosexual marriage and reproduction.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ One of the earliest and most thorough summaries of the medical literature is provided by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg whose essay, "Puberty to Menopause: The Cycle of Femininity in Nineteenth-Century America" (1973) documents the popular view that since a woman's body contained only a limited amount of energy, a girl had to curtail all activity and all interests outside the home in order to permit the full development of her reproductive organs. To fail to do so would result in abnormal physical development and consequent emotional difficulties. One Harvard professor, Dr. Edward H. Clarke, maintained in Sex in Education; or, A Fair Chance for the Girls, published in 1873, that the physical demand of menstruation made it physically impossible for girls to receive an equal education with boys.

Forcing herself out of bed so that she can return to the factory job that she loathes, Margret joins Lois on the trip into town. This journey from the outskirts of town to its industrial center provides a spatial metaphor for the similar social situations of the two women--one white, middle-class (though temporarily impoverished), educated, emotionally repressed; the other mulatto, working-class, mentally retarded, physically deformed. As they enter the community together, the connection between them is made explicit as Davis shifts the point of view from the narrator to Margret, thus allowing the reader to look at Lois through her protagonist's eyes:

some strange sympathy drew her to this poor wretch, dwarfed, alone in the world,--some tie of equality. . . . Somehow this creature, that Nature had thrown impatiently aside as a failure, so marred, imperfect, that even the dogs were kind to her, came strangely near to her, claimed recognition by some subtle [sic] instinct. (63-4)

The strange sympathy Margret feels with Lois is a reflection of her own profound sense of deformity, stemming from her feeling of being separate and different from women whose identities are located in heterosexual relationships.

Skipping ahead to an important scene near the end of the novel, this connection between sexual deviance and deformity is made even more explicit when the perception of sexual deprivation is transferred from Margret to Lois. As Lois is lying on her deathbed, she is visited by a young couple, Jenny Balls and Sam Polsten, whose marriage has been postponed because of the little mulatto's illness. Knowing that Lois will soon die, they have come to show her the wedding dress that she will be unable to see at the wedding. It is important to note that this is the first and only appearance of these characters; they play no other role in the novel, either before or after this episode, but are introduced only to represent the normal heterosexual life from which Lois has been excluded. As the young couple enter, epitomizing conventional standards of feminine appearance and masculine behavior, we are given a glimpse into Lois's feelings:

The poor deformed girl lay watching them, as they talked. Very pretty Jenny looked, with her blue eyes and damp pink cheeks; and it was a manly, grave love in Sam's face, when it turned to her. A different love from any she had known: better, she thought. It could not be helped; but it was better.

After they were gone, she lay a long time quiet, with her hand over her eyes. Forgive her! she, too, was a woman. (258)

This sentimental vision of the loneliness of the unmarried woman probably was intended to be a reflection of Margret's state of mind as well as Lois's. In the absence of a manuscript of the unrevised story, it is impossible to know with any certainty what kind of ending Davis had originally planned. However, most critics have agreed with William Grayborn's speculation that Davis probably had intended to violate the usual fictional pattern by killing off Stephen Holmes in the fire and leaving Margret Howth to live her days as a single woman working with the poor in the slums at the side of Dr. Knowles (Yellin 291). Certainly, the current "happy ending" which has Margret and Stephen united at the end is extremely unconvincing. Had Davis been able to end the novel as she had planned, the connection between Lois and Margret probably would have been extended, with Lois's final pain serving as a reflection of Margret's tragic state at the end of the novel. Although Davis did not present the sexual deviance of Lois and Margret as explicitly as she presented Hugh Wolfe, it appears clear that she meant for her reader to recognize the connection between Margret and Lois as being based on the fact that both women exist outside the boundaries of the community because both have been forced to live outside a society in which fulfillment is defined by the achievement of romantic, i.e. heterosexual, love, just as success is measured by the accumulation of wealth.

As important as is her role as the deviant woman whose deformity forces her to live unmarried outside the normal heterosexual social structure, Lois has yet another role that is equally as important: she serves as a model of the true artist. Just as Hugh Wolfe's sculpture represented the artistic drive in its purest form, Davis uses painting in Margret Howth as a synecdoche for all art, good and bad. The narrator refers to painting as a way of describing her

own techniques, when she self-deprecatingly labels her story "a rough sketch" and expresses her expectation that her reader no doubt prefers "idyls delicately tinted" (6). Later on, in an extended apologia for realism similar to that in the opening frame of "Life in the Iron Mills," the narrator again speaks in painterly terms as she comments upon the ordinariness of her material: "I am suddenly conscious of dingy common colors on the palette with which I have been painting. I wish I had some brilliant dyes" (101).⁶⁵ Davis also links the visual arts to Lois, setting up a connection between the illiterate, deformed peddler, who is repeatedly described as a genuine artist, and the narrator. She further emphasizes her point by contrasting Lois, as a naive artist, with the failed town painter, Mr. Kitts, and with all those who rely upon artificial conventions and traditional aesthetic standards rather than their own internal feelings as a measure of their art. At critical points throughout the novel, Lois is described as having a connection to beauty that is natural and unmediated by culture, fostered, ironically, by her "inferior" race and class:

What artist sense had she,--what could she know--the ignorant huckster--of the eternal laws of beauty or grandeur? Nothing. Yet something in the girl's face made her think that these hills, this air and sky, were in fact alive to her,--real; that her soul, being lower, it might be, than ours, lay closer to Nature, knew the language of the changing day, of these earnest-faced hills, of the very worms crawling through the brown mould. (65)

This is freedom from the artistic sophistication taken for granted by the educated class (represented again by the reader) is reiterated in a subsequent passage:

She had no self-poised artist sense, this Lois,--knew nothing of Nature's laws, as you do. . . . You tell me that doubtless, in the wreck of the creature's brain, there were fragments of some artistic insight that made her thus rise above the level of her daily life, drunk with the mere beauty of form and colour. I do

⁶⁵ In a similar way, Davis had given to her artist, Hugh Wolfe, only the drab refuse, kohl, as the material with which to create his crude and proletarian works of art.

not know,--not knowing how sham or real a thing you mean by artistic insight. But I do know that the clear light I told you of shone for this girl dimly through this beauty of form and colour; alive. (93-4)

Lois's naive artistic perception is translated into the crude objects that the peddler makes as gifts, works of art that serve not as a means of self-aggrandizement but as an expression of her unselfish love for others. First, there is a "rough wicker-basket" filled with moss, fern, lichens, and forest-leaves, that she sends to Holmes and about which Knowles remarks: "'An artist's gift, if it is from a mulatto,' he said. 'A born colourist. . . . That girl's artist-sense is pure, and her religion, down under the perversion and ignorance of her brain'" (110-111).⁶⁶ Later, just before her death, there are the Christmas presents which she had made for her friends and which we see through Holmes's eyes: "sitting quietly by her, he . . . looked at the heap of worthless trifles she had patched up for gifts, wondering secretly at the delicate sense of colour and grace betrayed in the bits of flannel and leather" (208).

Lois Yare is a complex figure whose meaning is shifting and elusive. As the dark thread that runs through Davis's first novel, she serves as a reflection of both the protagonist and the author. Because of her extreme deformity, she stands as a grotesque mirror image for the sexual and social deviance of the protagonist, Margret Howth, who began the novel and was probably meant to end it as a single woman, thwarted and frustrated by the circumstances of her life, much as Davis's earlier protagonist, Hugh Wolfe, had been. Through the imagery of painting, she also stands as a mirror image for the narrator as an artist who deviates from traditional convention by creating works that, though crude, are heartfelt and honest.

⁶⁶ Lois Yare's basket is directly related to the Quaker's "vase of wood-leaves and berries" and the narrator's "bough of forest-leaves" that appear in "Life in the Iron Mills." These tokens of nature also suggest a number of passages in Walt Whitman. It is especially interesting to place Davis's image of a vase in juxtaposition with the following passage from "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing," published in 1860, with its explicit reference to the phallus and suggestion of homosexuality: "I broke off a twig with a certain number of leaves upon it, and twined around it a little moss,/ And brought it away, and I have placed it in sight in my room,/ . . . it makes me think of manly love." A modern reader might also be reminded of Emily Dickinson's more private "blossom for Sue."

The stigmata Lois wears on her radically deformed body are the result of a catalogue of deviant identities--the economic subclass of the slave or former slave who is unable even to own herself, the racial nether world of the mulatto who combines white and African blood, and the sexually deviant world of the celibate woman. Yet, despite the extent of Lois's "outsiderness," she is embraced by the community she lives within. In a way, she occupies a social status similar to that described by Erving Goffman as that of the "in-group deviant," a member of a close-knit community who comes to play a special role by virtue of his or her deviant attributes while at the same time being denied the respect accorded to normal members. Such a person, according to Goffman, is exempt from the "social distance game," having access to all members of the community and being the focus of attention "that welds others into a participating circle around him, even while it strips him of some of the status of a participant" (142). It may be that Davis projected a part of herself into the kind of deviance represented by Lois Yare. Following her sudden success as the author of "Life in the Iron Mills," this formerly unknown, unmarried woman, from a mill town in the border state of West Virginia, had been embraced by the New England literary establishment and was even being courted by a young lawyer from Philadelphia. But as cordial as the eastern writers and editors were, Davis may have felt a little like Johnson's preaching woman/dancing dog when she was in their company, being shown off as exceptional but never really taken seriously as a mature artist. She may have projected that sense of the woman artist as an outsider into Lois Yare. This may have been the reason that this character was the one thread she refused to alter when the request came to revise her story.

Doctor Knowles, the other deformed figure in Margret Howth, stands in contrast to Lois Yare. An old man, grossly overweight, who is a partner of the mill and the self-appointed mentor for Margret, Knowles is one of the most grotesque characters in nineteenth-century fiction, as well as one of the most puzzling.⁶⁷ Being part Indian, "his veins thick with the blood of a

⁶⁷ Most critics have joined Tillie Olsen in believing that Knowles was "not too successfully modeled after Dr. [Francis Julius] Le Moyné" (92), a radical reformer, abolitionist, and political candidate who Davis knew when she attended a female seminary in Washington, Pennsylvania. Despite a superficial resemblance in political beliefs, the evidence linking

despised race," Knowles is, like Lois, racially marked as a deviant from the white Northern European norm (50). What is most striking about Knowles, however, is his massive body which is described in powerful language charged with both intense loathing and sexual connotation. In the following description of Knowles, seen through the eyes of Margret, his gigantic and repulsive body suggests a deformed penis: "An old man, overgrown, looking like a huge misshapen mass of flesh, as he stood erect, facing her. . . . The face watching her was one that repelled most men: dominant, restless, flushing into red gusts of passion, a small, intolerant eye, half hidden in folds of yellow fat" (12-13).

Knowles is a mass of contradictions. Unlike Lois, who can aspire to no greater status than that of a poor peddler, Knowles has somehow emerged from "the mire of dumb wretchedness" into which he was born to become a rich factory owner and an intellectual.⁶⁸ As the story opens, he also has become a radical social reformer who plans to sell his partnership in the factory in order to build a utopian community for the poor based on the principles of equal opportunity and celibacy. Although he is described in terms that emphasize his male sexuality, Knowles not only is dedicated to personal celibacy, but would impose a similar denial of sexuality upon others. Although he appears to be willing to dedicate himself and his fortune to improving social conditions for the lower classes, Knowles acts not out of innocent generosity and self-sacrifice, as does Lois, but from his own fanaticism and self-will. Neither does he have the same kind of social role as Lois did; where the little mulatto is loved and petted, Knowles is generally hated and feared.

Part-Indian, capitalist, intellectual, social reformer, celibate, and grotesque: it is as if Davis combined in one character a cluster of disparate qualities that could never exist in one actual person but which represented for her a set of ideas and feelings to which she responded with profound ambivalence. As a distorted embodiment of excessive intellect and passion, Doctor Knowles appears at various points in the novel to be an evil

Knowles with Le Moyne is not convincing enough to shed any light on the meaning of this character.

⁶⁸ Knowles's name suggests his association with the intellect.

monomaniac. Yet, despite his grotesqueness Knowles is committed to a personal mission that comes surprisingly close to the author's, for although he is distorted by intolerance and fanaticism, he is linked to her by ideals, beliefs, and goals. Because the author viewed Knowles with such ambivalence, the language used to describe him to the reader is both condemning and justifying. Note the following passage, in which the narrator appears to collude with the reader as a middle-class sentimentalist who shirks from the pain of the working classes. But although she presents herself as representing the critical judgements of society, she counters her own and the readers presumed condemnation with the view of God who is able to see Knowles's personal pain and his compassion for others who suffer:

People called this old Knowles an infidel, said his brain was as unnatural and distorted as his body. God, looking down into his heart that night, saw the savage wrestling there, and judged him with other eyes than theirs.

The story stood alive in his throbbing brain, demanding hearing. All things were real to this man, this uncouth mass of flesh that his companions sneered at; most real of all, the unhelped pain of life, the great seething mire of dumb wretchedness in streets and alleys, the cry for aid from the starved souls of the world. You and I have other work to do than to listen,--pleasanter. But he, coming out of the mire, his veins thick with the blood of a despised race, had carried up their pain and hunger with him: it was the most real thing on earth to him,--more real than his own share in the unseen heaven or hell. (49-50)

This attempt to establish a more positive view of Knowles is seen again later in the text as the narrator urges the reader to try to understand him:

Don't sneer at Knowles. Your own clear, tolerant brain, that reflects all men and creeds alike, like colourless water, drawing the truth from all, is very different, doubtless, from this narrow, solitary soul, who thought the world waited for him to fight down his one evil before it went on its slow way. An intolerant

fanatic, of course. But the truth he did know was so terribly real to him, there was such sick, throbbing pity in his heart for men who suffered as he had done! (179-80)

These juxtapositions of condemnation and justification suggest that Davis created in Knowles the most repulsive person she could imagine in order to then explain and redeem him. It is my belief that the reason for her ambiguous and often conflicting responses to Knowles is because he is a projection of herself, representing her deepest fears about what it might mean for her to continue to pursue her ambitions as a woman artist in a cultural environment that was both seductively welcoming and frighteningly inhospitable. I doubt whether Davis consciously drew this connection between herself and Knowles (as I think she did between herself and Lois Tare), but I believe Knowles's grotesqueness unconsciously reflects her most nightmarish vision of herself as a woman outside the pale and her deepest fears about how she might be seen by the people around her and by the invisible audience who, by reading her words, are able to see and judge her. That Knowles, unlike Lois Tare, is a grotesque and extraordinarily phallic male does not argue against this view but rather supports my opinion that Davis, like many women writers of her time, experienced disturbing confusions and fears about both gender and sexuality.

Specularity, especially the hidden gaze whereby one character spies upon another, is pervasive throughout Margret Howth, as it was in "Life in the Iron Mills," and contributes to a sense of uneasiness that haunts the text. This gaze is often one that passes from Knowles to Margret, but it also implicates both the narrator and the reader. In a compellingly disturbing scene that occurs in the first few pages of the novel, Knowles is explicitly portrayed as the eyes that secretly gaze upon the body of Margret. As Margret slowly makes her long way home at the close of her first day at work in the factory, Knowles follows her, keeping back at a distance, yet watching her every move. At the same time, the logic of the text requires that the narrator and reader must follow along behind both Knowles and Margret, secretly observing Knowles as he spies on Margret. The same phenomenon occurs after Margret and Knowles arrive at her house. After joining the impoverished family for a meager dinner, Knowles spends the evening

arguing with Margret's conservative father, but although he appears to be absorbed in his conversation, the narrator informs us that he never stops watching Margret. Both activities, the arguing and the watching, appear to be habitual and serve in the text to help define Knowles's character and to set the stage upon which the plot will unfold. But the act of watching committed by Knowles has another function: it makes the reader acutely aware of her own position in the text as the guest, in a sense, of the narrator, both of whom exist as invisible yet trespassing eyes, watching and judging the inner lives of characters who are unaware they are being observed.

Davis's emphasis upon specularity has another function, for it contributes to an atmosphere of heightened sexuality that pervades the novel. If, as we saw in the exchange of erotic glances between Hugh Wolfe and Mitchell, sight can be a sublimation of touch, the visual attention Knowles gives to Margret has an intensity and creepiness that suggest sexual violation. Moreover, the interactions between Knowles and Margret are often described in language that uses the imagery of rape or seduction. But the meaning of sexuality in this novel is not as obvious as this would suggest, for although Knowles is described in physical terms that suggest gross and forceful sexuality, he is positioned by Davis as an enemy of sex in general and of heterosexual marriage in particular by being a utopian, an old one at that, whose plan for social reform rests upon a commitment to celibacy, which he would impose on all who would participate. His plan for Margret is to mold her into a tool for social change and to do that he must remove from her all vestiges of warmth and sexuality so that she will remain unmarried. Although his gaze upon Margret is a violation described in sexual terms, he must objectify her as an ungendered, unhuman text to be read and as a weapon to be mastered:

[H]e tried to fancy how her new life would seem to her. It should be hard enough, her work,--he was determined on that; her strength and endurance must be tested to the uttermost. He must know what stuff was in the weapon before he used it. He had been reading the slow, cold thing for years,--had not got into its secret yet. But there was power there, and it was the power he wanted. (emphasis added, 19)

Ironically, then, the sexual power that resides within Knowles is used not to rape or seduce Margret but to keep her out of the heterosexual world she wants desperately to enter. Knowles is aware that Margret had once had a dream, "as most women have, of love and marriage, [but that] she had put it aside, he thought, forever." It is his belief that "this woman had been planned and kept by God for higher uses than daughter or wife or mother [and that] it was his part to put her work into her hands" (20). In opposing Margret's desire for a normal life, Knowles is in direct conflict with Stephen Holmes, the young man who plans to buy his share in the factory and upon whom Margret had once based her dreams of love and marriage. The main difference between the two men is that Holmes is determined to use his power to increase his own wealth by controlling his own emotions and by gaining sexual control over women, while Knowles is devoted to improving the lives of the poor by completely suppressing all sexuality, his own, Margret's, and that of all those he "saves." In either case, it is men who control women's emotions and bodies. Holmes is just as overbearingly aggressive as Knowles, especially in his relationship with Margret, and just as willing to deny his own emotional needs while depriving her of hers. With Holmes prepared to either seduce or give her up in order to realize his material ambitions and Knowles pressuring her to live as a celibate in order to help him realize his reformist goals, Margret is left with almost no capacity for expressing or realizing her own dreams. The apparently feminist message that Margret is capable of serving higher uses than would be possible if she settled for the typical female roles of daughter, wife, or mother, is undercut by the fact that this message comes not from her, or even from another woman, but from the grotesque and sexualized figure of Knowles. If Margret had her way, it would seem, she would gladly fall into the oppressive arms of the conventional social climber, Holmes.

What, then, is one finally to make of Doctor Knowles? In "Life in the Iron Mills," Davis had Mitchell speak of the need for a proletarian "light-bringer," who would be thrown up from the masses as a response to their need for reform. In many ways, Knowles appears to be that savior. In philosophy and principles, his words echo those of the author herself, but he is a grotesque and unnatural fanatic who represents Davis's deepest fears

about her own role as a writer and about the effects of her writing on her personal life. Just as Knowles uses Margret as an instrument for his own purposes, Davis uses her characters to express her own vision of the world. Davis seems to have been caught up in a familiar double bind: afraid, on the one hand, that writing would prevent her from living a "normal" life and, on the other, that marriage would prevent her from realizing her literary ambitions. When Knowles observes that "Nature had made the woman [Margret] in a freak of rare sincerity," (22) the double meaning of "freak"--both its original definition as a rare occurrence and the American slang meaning of a grotesque deviant on display--suggest a powerful fear of having one's difference exposed for all eyes to see that is shared by Knowles and Davis.⁶⁹

Most critics have agreed that Davis originally planned to end her novel with Margret working in the slums with Doctor Knowles, giving the victory to him and violating the heterosexual imperative of the sentimental novel. These plans were, of course, abandoned when Davis revised the story to bring Margret and Stephen Holmes together (the later presumably chastened by being himself deformed in the fire set by Lois Yare's father), providing a more conventional plot culminating in the marriage of the male and female protagonists. But what then could she do with Knowles? After the novel came out in serial form, with its artificially happy ending, Davis asked Fields if she could revise the last few pages before the bound version was printed. Her plan, which Fields rejected, was "to kill Dr. Knowles at Manassas" (290). One can only speculate about an author's motives, but it seems to me that her instinct to kill off her grotesque double may well have been a symbolic enactment of her own sense of self-destruction following her mutilation of her novel to please the public taste. On the other hand, it is possible that she may have come to believe that, as a successful author, she no longer needed to identify with the deformed, but was now able to project herself into a

⁶⁹ The association of the word "freak" with grotesque individuals who displayed their deformities in a side show was fully established in American English by 1883, according to citations in the OED. Albert Barrere and Charles G. Leland in their Dictionary of Slang, Jargon, and Cant, first published in London in 1889, give "freak" as an American term, meaning "men and women who make a living by exhibiting themselves as living skeletons, giants, dwarfs, and other freaks of nature" (383). It would seem that this use of the word "freak" developed as a result of the shows of P.T. Barnum which originated in New York in the 1850's, but it is not clear exactly when it was first used in this sense.

traditional hero and heroine who could live happily ever after. By the time Davis suggested changing the ending yet again, she was only five months from marrying Clarke Davis. It is possible that Davis's new found public acceptance and the imminent change in her own social status mitigated her sense of marginality.

Regardless of what happens to Knowles, it remains that Margret Howth is a badly deformed work. Davis was not alone, however, in allowing her circumstances to distort her artistic growth. Virginia Woolf might have been describing this nineteenth-century American writer when she wrote, just a few decades later, in A Room of One's Own, "to write a work of genius is almost always a feat of prodigious difficulty . . . probably no book is born entire and uncrippled as it was conceived" (54). According to Woolf, in order for the work of art to "come out whole," the artist's mind must be free from obstacles. Most importantly, especially for the woman artist, she must find a way to purge herself from the "hates and grievances," "anger and bitterness" that are the natural responses to the circumstances of her life (62-3). It can be said of Rebecca Harding Davis, as Woolf said of Lady Winchester and the Dutchess of Newcastle: "In both burnt the same passion for poetry and both are disfigured and deformed by the same causes" (64).

One can probably assume, however, that Davis would have objected to this assessment. In a sense, her personal and professional life really began after the publication of Margret Howth. Her marriage to Clarke Davis, who was to become a social reformer and newspaper editor of considerable influence, and her mothering of three children, one of whom was to become a well-known writer in his own right, more famous than either of his parents, represented for her a kind of success that cannot be easily dismissed. And even though she is primarily known today for her very first published work, she continued to have a long and productive literary career after her marriage, publishing twelve full-length books, and more than five hundred stories, essays, and articles over a course of more than forty years. Through her affiliations as a contributing editor with the New York Daily Tribune, the New York Independent, and the Saturday Evening Post, she reached a large and diverse audience with her social and political commentaries. The following sampling of articles that appeared in the Independent, most of

them written when she was over sixty, when her children were grown, gives a sense of her wide-ranging concerns: "Low Wages for Women" (1888), "Women in Literature" (1891), "The Passing of Niagara" (1897), "Two Methods With the Negro" (1898), "The Mean Face of War" (1899), "The 'Black North'" (1902), "Country Girls in Town" (1902), "The Disease of Money-Getting" (1902), and "The Trained Nurse" (1907). Through her journalistic work as well as her fiction, Davis never lost her commitment to forcing her readers to confront the realities of lives that were different and less privileged than theirs, and her writings make a genuine contribution to our understanding of the conflicts that challenged American society during the second half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. In a purely literary sense, Rebecca Harding Davis may not have fully realized the promise of genius that so powerfully struck the readers of "Life in the Iron Mills" when it appeared in 1861, and that continues to do so still. But her life was far from being a failure, by any measure.

3. Deformity as the Path to Redemption: Elizabeth Stuart Phelps

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps was one of the best known and most widely read authors of the late nineteenth century. Her professional career began at an extraordinarily early age and lasted right up to her death in 1911 at the age of sixty-six. Her literary production was extensive, consisting of fifty-seven full-length books, including novels, biographies, short stories, essays, and poetry, plus numerous uncollected works that were published only in magazines. Raised in an intellectual and religious family and community, she grew up among people who used words, oral and written, as a means of moral persuasion. As a novice writer whose work appeared in the Atlantic Monthly, she gained the attention and support of leading literary figures of an older generation, such as James T. Fields, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Throughout her life, she corresponded and visited with other women writers, in America and in England, and considered herself part of a generation of women who would show themselves capable of being ranked with the great (male) writers of the past.⁷⁰

In this chapter, I look at how this popular late nineteenth-century writer used narrative fiction to analyze the social constructions of gender and class, and the ways these constructions support the subjugation of women and the oppression of the working class. I examine the particular forms of feminism and Christianity which she saw as solutions to these social ills, and pay special attention to her critique of how the nineteenth-century notion of "true womanhood" served to oppress women of both the privileged and working classes. Above all, I show how Phelps appropriated the vocabulary and imagery of deformity to embody her social and moral concerns and convictions.

⁷⁰ Among her acquaintances were Annie Adams Fields, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet Prescott Spofford, Sarah Orne Jewett, Celia Thaxter, and Lucy Larcom. In addition to these American writers, Phelps maintained a regular correspondence with the English writer, George Eliot.

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps was a writer who took her craft and her role as an artist seriously. She was also a self-avowed moral reformist whose fictional stories and novels, as well as nonfictional essays, were shaped by an explicit social, political, and ethical agenda that combined a strong commitment to women's rights with an emotional and evangelical form of Christianity. "I never work 'for Art's sake,'" she wrote in a 1887 letter. "I don't believe in it. I work for life's sake, and for truth's sake; for God's sake when I can" (Coultrap-McQuinn 183). In her autobiography, Chapters from a Life, published in 1896 when she was fifty-two, she explained her view of the role of the artist in the following terms: "The province of the artist is to portray life as it is and life is moral responsibility. . . . An artist can no more fling off the moral sense from his work than he can oust it from his private life" (263).

Given her family background, Phelps's commitment to the principle of moral responsibility is not surprising.⁷¹ She was raised in Andover, Massachusetts, home of the Andover Theological Seminary, the leading training grounds for the Congregational clergy. According to Van Wyck Brooks in New England: Indian Summer (1940), at Andover "the old religion flourished as nowhere else" (79). As a member of Andover's leading religious and intellectual families on both her mother's and her father's sides, Phelps stands as one of the last American writers to have inherited in its purest form the legacy of American Puritanism, giving her a unique place in the cultural life of the late nineteenth century. Her maternal grandfather, Moses Stuart, was an eminent religious and academic figure who had held the position of Professor of Sacred Literature at Andover and was the author of numerous religious commentaries as well as the first German lexicon published in the United States. Her paternal grandfather, Eliahim Phelps, was a clergyman,

⁷¹ The following biographical information comes primarily from Phelps's autobiography Chapters from a Life (1896) and Elizabeth T. Spring's authorized biographical chapter on Phelps in Our Famous Women: An Authorized Record of Their Lives and Deeds (1884). I have also benefitted from three full-length studies of her life and work, Mary Angela Bennett's dissertation, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1939), Carol Farley Kessler's Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1982), and Lori Duin Kelly's The Life and Works of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Victorian Feminist Writer (1983), as well as from Susan Coultrap-McQuinn's chapter on Phelps in Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century (1990).

educator, and social reformer who was known for his stands against slavery and alcohol. Although he was considered to be more a preacher than a writer, his religious tracts were well-known and one sold over 200,000 copies.

Phelps's father, Austin Phelps, followed the religious, educational, and literary tradition set by both his own father and his father-in-law. Trained at Andover, he began his career as an ordained minister, before being invited back to the seminary to assume the Chair of Sacred Rhetoric and Homiletics when his daughter was still a young child. Eventually he became its President, a position that carried a weighty religious responsibility, making him the principle guardian of traditional Puritan doctrine in America. As Brooks put it, "the theological seminary, of which Austin Phelps was president now, symbolized . . . the last great wave of the Puritan faith, its final crusade to redeem the world" (80). A prolific and well-known writer of devotional and pedagogical works, Professor Phelps had a profound influence on his daughter. However, as a leading and powerful proponent of social as well as religious conservatism, his views were often directly opposed to hers. Especially in his later life, after his daughter had become a well-known author, he was a vocal opponent of equal rights for women whose anti-feminist tracts expressed the patriarchal ideology his daughter was devoted to overthrowing.

Phelps's mother, the first Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, was an author herself, who published a number of popular works of religious fiction for both children and adults. As both a writer and a mother, the elder Phelps might have provided an unusually strong role model for an aspiring young writer, but this talented and ambitious woman died, at the age of thirty-seven, when her daughter was only eight years old. Phelps later attributed her mother's death to the conflict between her female body and her art, as she was caught in the struggle of giving birth to another child at the same time she was attempting to complete a book. "Her last book and her last baby came together, and killed her," the daughter concluded (Chapters 12). The impact of the early loss of her mother can only be imagined. According to her friend, Elizabeth T. Spring in Our Famous Women, the death of her mother cast a further gloom over the life of a child who had always tended towards seriousness: "The little girl had never been exactly gleeful or merry. She had

not quite the temperament keyed for joy, and her almost premature thoughtfulness prevented life even then from seeming like a sunlit holiday" (562). Within a few years, Phelps, who had been born Mary Gray and was called "Lily" within the family, assumed her mother's full name and she continued to use it all her life, even after her marriage. Some insights into her feelings about her mother's death are found in her most highly regarded novel, *The Story of Avis* (1877), which most readers have understood to be a homage to the life and aspirations of her mother. Phelps wrote about this book in her autobiography that it "came from near my heart, and tore, it, perhaps, according" (226). She also described it as "a woman's book" and commented that "an author would care for it in proportion as she cared for her own sex" (272). More recently the novel has been called "a devastating analysis of the nature of heterosexuality," suggesting the nature of one of the lessons Phelps may have learned as a result of her mother's early death (Stansell 239).

Because of the legacy she inherited from her grandfathers, her father, and her mother, Phelps's literary life, as she herself put it in her autobiography, began a good while before she was born, but the specific effects of these powerful yet often conflicting influences on her politics and her literary work were complex. American literary critics, especially those writing in the first half of the twentieth century, prior to the development of a specifically feminist perspective, have tended to place Phelps and her works exclusively within the New England Puritan tradition she inherited from the powerful male figures on both sides of her family. For example, Brooks, an influential early Americanist, recognizing only the impact of Phelps's father on her beliefs, concludes that not only had "the President's daughter . . . mastered the 'Andover argument'" but, as a result, "[t]he tortured conscientiousness of Miss Phelps's novels reflected the Andover atmosphere." Brooks thereby reduces Phelps's works to "problem-stories that sprang from the Andover mind," complaining that while they "were often poignant and skillful . . . the tone of her work in general was too consciously righteous" (81-82). While this assessment reflects one side of Phelps, Brooks ignores the pervasive feminist motive and content of much of her work. Because he acknowledges only her paternal legacy (which he signals by referring to her as "the President's daughter"), he overlooks the powerful

influence of her mother, the pain Phelps experienced with her loss, and the extent of her personal rebellion against her father and the values represented by Andover. Although Phelps inherited a strong sense of morality from both her parents, her interpretation of what constitutes moral good included a strong commitment to improving the lives of women and others who lack power. That these feminist convictions developed in a hostile environment and brought with them the disapproval of her father and the religiously orthodox community he represented, are painfully clear in the following passage from her autobiography:

It is almost impossible to understand now, what it meant when I was twenty-five, for a young lady reared as I was, on Andover Hill, to announce that she should forthwith approve and further the enfranchisement and elevation of her own sex. Seen beside the really great martyrdoms and dedications of the "causes" which throb through our modern life, this seems an episode only large enough to irritate a smile. Yet I do not, to this hour, like to recall, and I have no intention whatever of revealing, what it cost me. (250)

It was undoubtedly her rebellion against the values represented by her father which exacted the heavy personal costs to which she alludes but is unwilling to reveal. She allows herself to be more specific about her assessment of the prejudices of her community against women in a later chapter about another resident of Andover, Harriet Beecher Stowe, who, in Phelps's estimation, was insufficiently valued by her neighbors. In seeking to account for this neglect, Phelps writes:

I have since found suspicion blossoming into a belief that the vagueness of arithmetic which led to an insufficient estimate of Mrs. Stowe's value, or at least to a certain bluntness in our sense of the honor which she did to Andover by living among us, sprung from the fact that she was a woman. (133)

She goes on to observe with bitter humor that "Andover was a heavily masculine place. She was used to eminent men, and to men who thought they were, or meant to be, or were thought to be by the ladies of their families,

and the pillars of their denomination." In Phelps's estimation, the town was not prepared to recognize eminent women because it did not believe women could be eminent. Personalizing this observation even further, she continues: "I have sometimes wondered what would have been the fate even of my mother, had she lived to work her power to its bloom" (133). Scarcely hidden by her references to two women writers of an earlier generation, Stowe and her own mother, is a glimpse of Phelps's personal experience of living and working within an alien and unaccepting environment. By explicitly challenging the masculine dominance of Andover, Phelps took on both her father and the powerful tradition he represented.

Phelps's first literary expression of her rebellion against her father came when she began writing The Gates Ajar at the age of twenty. This utopian novel is written in the form of a journal kept by a young orphan, Mary Cabot, whose much beloved brother, Roy, has been killed in the Civil War. Although she is initially plunged into despair by the loss, which seems to leave her alone in the world, Mary is able to regain hope and the will to live with the help of her widowed aunt Winifred Forceythe who, with her daughter Faith, comes to live with her. Aunt Winifred offers Mary the physical consolation of a mother and a comforting theology based on a belief in an earthlike heaven where loved ones will be reunited after death. Aunt Winifred's maternal warmth and her reassuring view of life after death is presented as an alternative to the emotional harshness of traditional Protestant doctrine as expressed by the paternal figures of Deacon Quirk and the minister Dr. Bland.⁷² In the end, strengthened by her new faith in a God and heaven that are unlike those represented in traditional Puritan doctrine, Mary is able to find the courage to confront a second devastating earthly loss when Winifred herself is overcome by cancer and dies. However, having shifted the object of her love from the masculine (her brother killed by war) to the feminine (her aunt killed by cancer), Mary is now safely situated within a female community as she prepares to pass on the lessons she has been

⁷² Phelps often selects names that suggest meaning, such as Winifred Forceythe (which can be shortened to Win and Force) and her daughter, Faith. Here she also uses the allegorical names, Deacon Quirk and Dr. Bland, ironically to express her assessment of the clergy with their quibbling arguments and their unfeeling attitudes.

taught by serving, in turn, as a surrogate mother for Winifred's orphaned daughter.

Phelps's biographers have speculated that Phelps was motivated to write The Gates Ajar after the death of a young lover, Samuel Hopkins Thompson, in the battle of Antietam on October 22, 1862. Although this speculation has been widely accepted, the evidence supporting it is scanty and circumstantial. Mary Angela Bennett is the first of Phelps's biographers to cite the death of Thompson as the inspiration for the writing of Beyond the Gates, stating that although "there had perhaps been no formal engagement, . . . there was on her part at least a very deep attachment" (44). Although Bennett gives no source for this information, a later biographer, Carol Farley Kessler, cites a newspaper article in the Boston Transcript, dated February 4, 1911, a week after Phelps died, as providing information about her relationship with Thompson and notes the many poems and short stories by Phelps which concern a love lost through death (n. 137). Although she acknowledges that the situation depicted in Beyond the Gates is "far from her own life," Kessler speculates that "imagining a brother's death rather than a lover's may have given Phelps the psychic distance necessary to harness her pain to constructive use, since a brother would typically have less impact upon a woman's future than a husband" (30). There is no mention of a specific inspiration for the novel in Elizabeth Spring's biographical piece on Phelps published in Our Famous Women (1884). Nor does Phelps herself mention a relationship with Thompson or any other man in her autobiography although, to be sure, she omits a lot of personal material from that book. She does, however, provide a more general motive for writing the book that is consistent with her early sense of social purpose and her devotion to the needs of women: "I wished to say something that would comfort some few . . . of the women whose misery crowded the land" (97). She also expresses her sense of the inadequacy of men and male institutions to provide such comfort to afflicted women in general and reflects on the effect their emotional deficiencies have had on her own life:

For it came to seem to me, as I pondered these things in my own heart, that even the best and kindest forms of our prevailing beliefs had nothing to say to an afflicted woman that could help

her much. Creeds and commentaries and sermons were made by men. What tenderest of men knows how to comfort his own daughter when her heart is broken? What can the doctrines do for the desolated by death? They were chains of rusty iron eating into raw hearts. (98)

It is possible that Phelps is referring in this passage to her heartbreak upon the death of Samuel Thompson, but it is also possible that she is recalling the pain of a young girl whose mother had died. Whether or not the loss of a man originally inspired the writing of The Gates Ajar, the ultimate outcome was the creation of a woman-centered novel in which men are portrayed as not only useless but intrusive, and in which older women comfort younger women faced with the loss of their mothers or surrogate mothers.

The Gates Ajar was published in late 1868, when Phelps was only twenty-four. According to her account of its publication, the book was at first rejected by James T. Fields of Fields, Osgood and Company, who changed his mind only after the intervention of his wife, Annie Adams Fields.⁷³ To everyone's surprise, the novel became an instant sensation: it sold more copies than any book since Uncle Tom's Cabin, was published throughout the world, and was translated into at least five languages. Because of its popular success, the book even spawned a bizarre assortment of souvenirs and songs. The Gates Ajar clearly struck a chord in the heart of post-war America and Phelps continued to receive emotional correspondence from devoted readers all her life. But in direct proportion to its popular success, the book and its young author became the targets of virulent attacks from the press and the pulpit. In the following account, Phelps assumes the third person to describe a "moral" outcry that must have been bewildering and painful:

Religious papers waged war across that girl's notions of the life to come, as if she had been an evil spirit let loose upon accepted theology for the destruction of the world. . . . Heresy was her crime, and atrocity her name. She had outraged the church. She

⁷³ Following this early intervention on the part of Annie Fields, she and Phelps became lifelong friends, and as a result, Phelps was drawn into the literary and artistic circle that surrounded Fields and her companion, Sarah Orne Jewett.

had blasphemed its sanctities. . . . Opinion battled about that poor little tale, as if it had held the power to overthrow church and state and family. (118-9)

This outburst of condemnation would have been difficult for any twenty-four-year-old writer to endure. But Phelps was not just anyone; she happened to be the daughter of one of the most influential and conservative theologians of the time, and she had had the audacity, or the naivete, to dedicate the book to him, although he had no knowledge of its existence until she brought him a published copy. The president of Andover must have been outraged and embarrassed by a work that rejected the theological principles he represented.⁷⁴

Despite Phelps's youth when The Gates Ajar was published, it was not her first published work. Up to the age of nineteen, Phelps had attended a private school which she described in her autobiography as "known to the irreverent as the 'Nunnery,' but bearing in professional circles the more stately name of Mrs. Edwards School for Young Ladies" (59). She seems to have received a decent education there although by her own admission, she "was not at all a remarkable scholar," being rather "an out-of-door girl, always into every little mischief of snow or rainfall, flower, field, or woods or ice" (Chapters 60-61). However, writing was a natural outlet for this talented and serious child. By the time she was thirteen, she had published at least one story in the children's magazine, Youth's Companion, and had written "three full-grown novels in manuscript" which she read aloud to her "dearest particular intimate" on Saturday afternoons (Chapters 74-5). By her own account, this daughter of at least two generations of writers had decided when she was sixteen, after reading Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Aurora Leigh," to become a professional writer.⁷⁵ However, writing for Phelps was never separate from her commitment to social change and upon first leaving

⁷⁴ In a much later novel, A Singular Life (1895), Phelps presents a similar situation in which a young theological student rejects the principles of his seminary, incurring the wrath of his mentor, the President, a man much like Austin Phelps, and causing his expulsion from the ministry.

⁷⁵ A fictionalized account of this event is found in The Story of Avis (30-32). Barrett Browning remained one of Phelps's favorite poets throughout her life.

school, according to Elizabeth Spring, she spent a year devoted to philanthropic work in places like Abbott Village, a factory settlement a mile or so from her home (565). Her career as an adult author began with a story entitled "A Sacrifice Consumed," that was published in Harper's New Monthly Magazine in January 1864 when she was not yet twenty.⁷⁶ Phelps's intentions as a young aspiring writer were serious: she meant to write well, with a conscientious sense of her moral responsibilities, and she meant to support herself. By 1868, when she experienced sudden fame as the author of The Gates Ajar, she had already published a number of serious stories in both Harper's and the Atlantic, as well as a series of Sunday School books and an assortment of shorter works for children, and was well on her way to accomplishing these goals.

One of these early stories, published in the March 1868 Atlantic, held special importance for Phelps because, in her words, "it distinctly marked for me the first recognition which I received from literary people" (Chapters 92). In addition to the gratification of having her work accepted by the most prestigious periodical of the time, which in 1868 was edited by James Fields, with William Dean Howells as assistant editor, "The Tenth of January" brought congratulatory letters from John Greenleaf Whittier and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, literary elder statesmen, who had long enjoyed close associations with the Atlantic, and who had supported the efforts of a number of other serious women writers whose early works had appeared there, including, as we have already seen, both Harriet Spofford and Rebecca Harding Davis. Many years later, both of these slightly older women writers were singled out by Phelps as having had a particularly strong influence on her early work in an essay written not long before her death, titled "Stories That Stay" (Century, November 1910). In this essay, she attributes to Spofford's "The Amber Gods," which appeared in the Atlantic in 1860, "a

⁷⁶ There is a controversy regarding a possible earlier story, entitled "'Tenty Scran,'" that appeared in the November 1860 Atlantic Monthly and was attributed to Phelps in an index published by the Atlantic in 1889. A full account of the situation is given by Bennett who concludes that Phelps was probably not the author since it is unlikely that she would have either forgotten or disclaimed a story published in such a prestigious magazine when she was barely sixteen. Other critics, such as Kelly, have included the story in Phelps's bibliography on the grounds that the style and subject matter are consistent with her other work. I join Bennett in doubting the accuracy of the index rather than the memory of the author.

certain subtle influence upon me (afterwards recognized) in the trend which my mind was then taking toward the imaginative treatment of the after life." About "Life in the Iron Mills," published in the Atlantic in 1861, Phelps wrote that the "story was a distinct crisis for one young writer at the point where the intellect and the moral nature meet. . . . One could never say again that one did not understand. The claims of toil and suffering upon ease had assumed a new form."⁷⁷

Both of these literary works, published around the time Phelps decided to become a writer herself, had an influence on her early work. "The Tenth of January" was originally inspired, however, by an actual event. In a lengthy account provided in her autobiography, Phelps writes about the collapse and burning of the Pemberton Mills that took place in Lawrence, Massachusetts, just three and a half miles from her home, on the tenth of January, 1860. Eighty-eight workers were killed in the disaster, nearly all of them mill-girls, who "caught in the ruins beyond hope of escape, began to sing . . . [until] voice after voice dropped." Her younger brother, "being of the privileged sex," was allowed to go to Lawrence to witness the event at firsthand. Phelps had to stay behind, but the glow of the burning mill could be seen from her window and the disaster left a deep impression, forming the basis for her first important literary work which was published seven years later (Chapters 91).

The plot of "The Tenth of January" is simple and conventional. The main character, Asenath Martyn, is a worker in the Pemberton Mills. Sene, as she is generally called, is physically deformed as a result of having been abused when she was a young child by her mother, an alcoholic, who has since died.⁷⁸ Her father, a weak and sickly cobbler, loves his daughter but, like most of Phelps's male characters, is unable to do anything to help her and is,

⁷⁷ Although Phelps appears not to have known Davis, she and Spofford became friends who wrote to each other frequently throughout their lives. Homages to Spofford appear often in Phelps's work: a number of allusions to "The Amber Gods" are found in The Story of Avis, including a scene in a Paris church in which Phelps refers to an amber intaglio and an amber god (38-39), and an echo of "Circumstance" is heard in The Silent Partner (76), see n. 21.

⁷⁸ Phelps continues her practice of selecting names that carry metaphoric meanings; in this case the name Sene suggests the act of being seen and Martyn suggests the martyrdom that comes to the protagonist at the end of the story.

in fact, almost totally dependent upon her. The one bright spot in her life is Dick Cross, a young man from "downeast" who boards with Sene and her father, and who, being lonely and taking pity on Sene, has promised to marry her. Conflict is introduced when Dick becomes attracted to the pretty but shallow Del Ivory. Although he tries to repress his feelings, Sene becomes aware of his struggle when she sees the two together at the river. Being honorable, Dick is determined to stand by his pledge to Sene, and although she knows she ought to give him up, her own desire for happiness makes her unable to make the sacrifice. This is the situation on January tenth. Sene and Del are working in the mill side by side. When the building collapses, because of a flaw in its construction, the two girls are trapped. Sene is pinned under the fallen debris and a finger on which she wears Dick's ring is severed by a fallen beam. Del, though barely scratched, is incapable of doing more than weep piteously and scream hysterically. When the fire starts, the situation becomes even more critical. A rescuer breaks through the rubble but has time to save only one of them before the fire reaches them. Through this act of God, Sene is given the opportunity to sacrifice her own earthly happiness and she offers Del the chance to escape. Without hesitation, Del crawls to freedom and into the arms of Dick who can no longer hide his love for her. As Sene, now hopelessly trapped, watches the lovers leave, she takes a younger girl onto her lap and begins to sing, leading the other victims in song while the factory burns around them. Her father arrives too late to help.

As this summary makes clear, the plot of "The Tenth of January" is firmly grounded in the sentimental tradition of nineteenth-century popular literature. The story is saved from mere bathos, however, by the comments made by the narrator and the role of the deformed character, Asenath Martyn, both of which are used by Phelps to challenge the traditions of romantic fiction and capitalist industrialism.

Unlike the stories written by Spofford, in which the narrator is also the story's protagonist, or those written by Davis, in which the narrator has a distinct role and an almost visible presence in the narrative, the narrator of "The Tenth of January" tells a story that is not her own in a voice that is relatively transparent and unobtrusive. Phelps's narrative voice can be described, to adopt the terminology of Susan Sniader Lanser, as being an

"overt authorial voice," in which the narrator undertakes "'extrarepresentational' acts: reflections, judgments, generalizations about the world 'beyond' the fiction, direct addresses to the narratee, comments on the narrative process, allusions to other writers and texts" (16-17). Through these "'extrarepresentational' acts," specifically her addresses to the reader, her comments on traditional writing styles, and her claims for historical and descriptive accuracy, the narrator positions herself as telling a "true" story which she claims is based on "real" people, places, and events. Further, by declaring the authenticity of her heroine and by mocking the sentimentalism which characterizes the life of her imaginary reader, Phelps challenges her reader to identify with the "authentic" Asenath as contrasted with the artificial and stereotypical heroine of the sentimental romance.

From the beginning of the story, Phelps establishes her narrator as a self-conscious commentator on the nature of her material and her own literary style whose tone is often laden with irony. In the first sentence, the narrator states a simple fact: "The city of Lawrence is unique in its way." She then enters into a long, overblown, descriptive sentence, packed with cliché and picturesque detail, that pokes fun at the relatively new and popular local color genre as well as the older sentimental tradition. After running on in this manner for nearly a full page, the narrator stops abruptly in mid-sentence with the line: "I believe, when I commenced that sentence, I intended to say that it would be difficult to find Lawrence's equal" (305). The narrator then provides, in an abrupt change of tone and an implied contradiction to her claim about her material's uniqueness, a simple and stark statistic that in its cold specificity could apply to nearly any similarly sized industrial town: "Of the twenty-five thousand souls who inhabit that city, ten thousand are operatives in the factories. Of these ten thousand two thirds are girls" (306). In these subtle and almost mocking ways, Phelps establishes that her story will, indeed, be a different kind of fiction from that usually found in the magazines.

As the story progresses, Phelps continues to establish her opposition to the sentimental romance by having her narrator refer directly to that tradition and specifically to her readers' presumed reading habits. At one point she directly challenges her readers' expectations regarding the proper

behavior of a traditional heroine by comparing her own protagonist to an imaginary and romantic "Floricitia," insisting that, in contrast, "Asenath was no heroine, you see" (328-9). At another point, after describing the anguish of her protagonist, she refers back to her readers, asking "how should you like it, you young girls, with whom time runs like a story?" (332), implying that the daily lives of her readers, who presumably exist in the real world, are more akin to the fiction they read than the imagined but authentic experiences of her fictional character. By placing her "fictional" narrative in the context of "real life," Phelps comments on class differences, drawing a striking contrast between the hardships of the working-class girls and the comforts of her middle-class readers.

Phelps also challenges the sentimental tradition in the ways she develops and presents her protagonist. Asenath Martyn is first introduced by the narrator as "slightly built, and undersized," with "a sickly face, shaded off with purple shadows," and with what "would have been a womanly, pleasant mouth, had it not been crossed by a white scar" (307). This description, which we are meant, I believe, to accept as an accurate, that is, as an objective, portrait, directs us to picture the main character as a rather pathetic and unattractive girl. But what are initially presented by the narrator as mild flaws in appearance seem to escalate into monstrosities as we begin to view Asenath from her own perspective as it has been formed by the prejudices of society. In other words, our interpretation of Sene's appearance changes as the perception of that appearance shifts from the viewpoint of the narrator to the self-reflective gaze of the girl herself. Soon after the story opens, the narration turns to Sene's memory of the past and we observe her as a young girl looking at herself in the mirror and seeing a "ghastly twisted thing" who is humiliated when other children call her a "humpback" (311-2). As she grows into young adulthood, a time when most young women begin to long for love, she hears others whisper: "'Look at that girl! I'd kill myself if I looked like that'" (315). As she develops her own sense of identity and begins to assess her life prospects, Sene accepts the connection others make between appearance and love, fearing that she has no chance for conventional happiness because of her deformities. Later in the story when she comes upon a young man sitting on the riverside with Del, she quickly adopts society's standards of desirability, thinking to herself: "'it's no wonder they love her.

I'd love her if I was a man: so pretty! so pretty! She's just good for nothing'" (318) And when she, sitting unseen in the bushes, realizes that the smitten young man is her own Dick, she contrasts herself with the prettier Del, visualizing herself in monstrous and inhuman terms as "a humpbacked white creature, with distorted face and wide eyes." She even draws her self-image from folk literature, as Davis's Deborah had: "She remembered a picture she had somewhere seen of a little chattering goblin in a graveyard, and she was struck by the resemblance" (319).⁷⁹

This series of grotesque self-imaginings comes to a climax when, returning home to her room from the river, Sene directly confronts her deformity by staring at her own reflection while Dick goes into his room "to look at Del's photograph awhile before he burned it up":

Asenath, when she had locked her door, put her lamp before the looking-glass and tore off her gray cape; tore it off so savagely that the button snapped and rolled away,--two little crystal semicircles like tears upon the floor.

There was no collar about the neck of her dress, and this heightened the plainness and the pallor of her face. She shrank instinctively at the first sight of herself, and opened the drawer where the crimson cape was folded, but shut it resolutely.

"I'll see the worst of it," she said with pinched lips. She turned herself about and about before the glass, letting the cruel light gloat over her shoulders, letting the sickly shadows grow purple on her face. Then she put her elbows on the table and her chin into her hands, and so, for a motionless half-hour, studied the unrounded, uncolored, unlightened face that stared back at her; her eyes darkening at its eyes, her hair touching its hair, her breath dimming the outline of its repulsive mouth.

⁷⁹ According to the sociologist, Erving Goffman in *Stigma* (1963), the "self-hate and self-derogation" of stigmatized individuals are created by social standards that define what is normal. A split between the stigmatized person's sense of how he sees himself and how he is seen by others is reinforced by "the immediate presence of normals," but "can also occur when only he and a mirror are about" (7).

By and by she dropped her head into her hands. The poor, mistaken face! She felt as if she would like to blot it out of the world, as her tears used to blot out the wrong sums upon her slate. It had been so happy! But he was sorry for it, and all that. Why did a good God make such faces? (327)

The above scene, with Dick in one room gazing at the photograph of a girl he loves because of her prettiness, while Sene is in the next room gazing at her own flawed face which appears to her to be unlovable, is stunning in its dramatic portrayal of gender differences. The man, Dick, looks only outward, away from himself, at the other--the object of his desire--whom he has the power to judge as beautiful or ugly, desirable or repulsive. The woman, Asenath, can only look reflexively back upon herself--the object of male desire or revulsion--whom she is forced to judge according to the standards held by the male gazer. Her compliance with her own objectification and the resulting alienation from her own body are evident in her use of the third person--"it"--to refer to her face. What is so horrifying about this episode is not so much what we imagine might be seen in the mirror, for what Sene seems to see is striking only for its ordinariness, but rather it is the profound sense of horror and abjection experienced by the girl as she gazes upon herself. What we realize as we go back and examine the language Phelps uses throughout the story to depict Sene's deformity is that its horror lies only in the perceptions of Sene and the people around her--other children, her friends, and especially the pitying Dick.

Though Sene's appearance is not inherently horrifying, there is another kind of physical deformity depicted in the story, that is, although it is not, at first, as readily apparent. It is the mill itself. In her explanation of the Pemberton Mill disaster, Phelps makes sure the reader understands that the tragedy originated with a deformity in the building's construction that could not be seen by looking at its surface from the outside. After the historical disaster, which Phelps carefully researched before she wrote her fictional account, it was revealed that the mill had been erected upon pillars that contained defective cores made of inferior materials which eventually gave out under the weight of the machinery. When that moment finally comes in

the story, Sene imagines the collapsing building as a giant deformed monster devouring the human bodies in its grasp:

Looked up to see her overseer turn wildly, clap his hands to his head, and fall; to hear a shriek from Del that froze her blood; to see the solid ceiling gape above her; to see the walls and windows stagger; to see iron pillars reel, and vast machinery throw up its helpless, giant arms, and a tangle of human faces blanch and writhe! (341)

In commenting upon the disaster, the narrator extends the metaphor of the monstrous deformity of the anthropomorphized mill to the very real effect of its collapse upon the actual bodies of the workers who are trapped by it, as she recalls "the wrecks of men and women who endure unto this day a life that is worse than death" and notes the suddenness with which a living body can become "a mangled mass of death and horror" (342, 343). Transposing this bodily destruction back again to the collapsed mill, she writes: "Where Pemberton had winked its many eyes last night, and hummed with its iron lips this noon, a cloud of dust, black, silent, horrible, puffed a hundred feet into the air" (343). The deformity that ultimately horrifies is not the one which is apparent (which is seen/Sene) but the one that had been invisible (unseen). This deformity, which is revealed when the mill collapses, symbolizes an essential and destructive flaw in the men and the society who built it and profited by it.⁸⁰

Most critics have examined "The Tenth of January" from one of two perspectives: sociological realism or sentimental romanticism. Critics in the former category have read it as one of the first works in American literature, along with Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills," devoted to exposing the conditions of the working class. By emphasizing the social context in which the plot unfolds, such readings have tended to reduce the work to thinly disguised journalism. Following this course, Bennett sees the story as "a

⁸⁰ The idea of using a defective building to symbolize the essential evil of the people associated with it might have come from Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." However, in Poe's symbolic story, the building collapses upon those whose sins created the structural flaw, while Phelps shows a more realistic situation in which those responsible for the collapse are untouched by the outcome of their greed while the innocent are victimized.

faithful account, based upon some weeks of investigation, of an actual catastrophe, made poignant by being centered around the tragedy of one of its victims" (28); Kessler makes reference to the story in passing as "a realistic tale that launched her serious literary career" (124); and Kelly categorizes it as "a fictionally embellished account of an actual event" (4). Such readings are limited. Despite Phelps's own account of the story's origins, her conscientious research into the circumstances surrounding the collapse of the real Pemberton Mills, and her very real concern about the lives of the working class, her story is not primarily about the ill effects of oppressive social conditions on the poor. In particular, the character of Asenath and the meaning of her deformities has greater significance than that of a case history. Even though Phelps initially attributes Sene's hunchback and scars to beatings she suffered at the hands of her mother, her story is not a fictional narrative on the consequences of child abuse or the evils of alcohol.

Other critics, especially those who have been influenced by feminist re-evaluations of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, have focused on Phelps's narrative as a love story. The tendency to circumscribe Phelps's meaning by reading it within the context of an earlier convention is also misleading. Mary Jo Buhle and Florence Howe, in their "Afterword" to the Feminist Press reprint of The Silent Partner and "The Tenth of January," correctly focus attention on the protagonist Asenath, but read her story as an account of female rivalry:

Despite the industrial accident, the point of the story is the competition between two women, one beautiful, the other ugly, for a man. While the germ is present in Life in the Iron Mills, here Phelps has placed the hunchbacked woman at her story's center in order to portray vividly a young woman's desire to be loved despite her self-loathing and her awareness that others cannot bear to look at her. (374)

According to this reading, which relates "The Tenth of January" to Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills," the deformities of both Deborah and Asenath signify nothing but a physical characteristic that prevents them from attracting the romantic love of a man. It is true that both characters want to be loved, and that both are subject to self-loathing as well as to a fear that others find them

loathsome, but if either Deborah or Asenath are defined only by the frustration of their desire to be romantically attractive to a man, the meaning of both these works is trivialized and distorted.

In order to fully understand what Phelps meant to convey in this story, it is necessary to recognize the thoroughness of her condemnation of traditional sentimental literature, the centrality of Christianity in her fiction as a means of social reform, and the depth of her assessment of the fundamental inadequacies of men. These elements come together in the final pages of "The Tenth of January" in a way that deepens the meaning of Asenath's deformity. Throughout the narrative, Phelps had portrayed her protagonist as nearly Christlike. This identification of the deformed girl with Christ is made explicit when, just before the collapse of the mill, she recalls the lines: "He hath no form nor comeliness. His visage was so marred more than any man'" (340). Like Christ on the cross, Asenath is both physically deformed and inherently deserving of love. But when Dick's love is tested, it turns out to be nothing but shallow pity. In the final moments of the narrative, after Del has been rescued, the narrator and reader are left in the burning ruins with the rejected Asenath as she watches the two lovers, Dick and Del, go off together:

Asenath looked out through the glare and smoke with parched lips. For a scratch upon the girl's smooth cheek, he had quite forgotten her. They had left her, tombed alive here in this furnace, and gone their happy way. Yet it gave her a curious sense of relief and triumph. If this were all that she could be to him, the thing which she had done was right, quite right. God must have known. She turned away, and shut her eyes again. (349)

Although he appears to be kind and sympathetic, Dick is seduced by surface beauty and his pursuit of pleasure, and fails to recognize either the shallowness that is disguised by prettiness in Del or the inner good that is hidden by a deformed exterior in Sene. The collapse of the Pemberton Mills is a corollary to the human story. Although the building looked sound on the outside, it was fatally flawed at its core as a result of the carelessness and greed of the men who built it. In the end, it is Sene who is burdened, like Christ, by

bodily deformities, while it is the men around her--her father, the men who built and owned the mill, and Dick--who are inherently flawed, like the social and physical structures they have built.

"The Tenth of January" goes beyond a critique of either romantic love or industrialism alone. By telling the story of a mill disaster within the context of a romantic love story, Phelps was able to conflate the two and show how both personal and social relationships are flawed at their core because of the weaknesses of men. This short narrative by a woman in her early twenties is a complex indictment of a society dominated by materialism and greed, and consequently willing to overlook inner flaws, no matter how potentially destructive they may be, so long as they are covered over by attractive surfaces. Through the character of Dick, Phelps seems to be arguing that most men are unable to perceive and appreciate anything but the most shallow and transient forms of earthly beauty, even though they may be deeply flawed from within. Supported by a firm belief in a form of Christianity based on human emotion, Phelps made a connection between the inadequacy of romantic, heterosexual love, driven by the attraction of men to outer beauty, and the cruelty of industrial America, driven by men's economic greed. In The Gates Ajar, Phelps's rejection of male values and her woman-centeredness took the form of rebellion against the emotional coldness of the male Andover clergy and their Puritan doctrines, replacing it with a female belief in a religion that is responsive to human needs. In "The Tenth of January," her focus turned away from the Andover men, such as her father, to take in, more broadly, the materialism that seemed to drive men's actions in the larger world.

Phelps wrote "The Tenth of January" sometime between 1860 and 1868. During these years, she often must have thought, as she had Asenath say, "I know I'm not like other girls!" (335). But what began with a sense of alienation from the kind of girl she thought she was supposed to be developed into a critique of conventional views of womanhood she had been taught to accept. According to Phelps's autobiography, she was twenty-five years old when she publicly declared her dedication to the cause of women. That would have been sometime in 1869 or 1870. By 1871, Phelps began to publish articles that are clearly feminist in content. One of the short

newspaper pieces that came out in that year was a satirical critique of the conventions mandated for white, middle-class, American women entitled, "The True Woman" (Independent 23; 1. October 12, 1871). In it she attacked society's opinion that a woman, in order to be considered a true member of her gender, must subordinate her own life to that of her husband and that she must not engage herself in the world outside her home:

The "true woman," we are told, desires and seeks no noisy political existence. To the "true woman" the whirr and bustle of public life are unattractive. A "true woman" honors the homely virtues and appreciates the quiet dignity of house-hold life. She is no "true woman" who cannot find in the "sweet, safe corner . . . behind the heads of children" scope for her activities and content in her adjustment to them. A "true woman" will shrink from the rough contact of the world. The "true woman" instinctively merges her life--social, political, commercial--in that of her husband. When this transient excitement is over, the "true woman" will outlive and outshine it--a testimony to the "reform against Nature" and herself. (Kelly 52-3)

When Phelps wrote "The Tenth of January," she had not yet developed a political and analytical understanding of the oppression of women to match her emotional response to what she saw as personal and social injustices. Her next important work, A Silent Partner, written within the next two years and published in 1871, came after she had declared a dedication to the cause of women, and had begun to express her feminist ideas in newspaper and magazine articles such as the one just cited. In this early novel, which has been called one of her most powerful, we see an extension of the strong emotional content of the earlier story coupled with a more positive grasp of her material and a direct challenge to her contemporaries' notion of how women should be and behave.⁸¹ In The Silent Partner, Phelps shows how

⁸¹ In addition to the full-length works on Phelps already noted, and Buhle and Howe's afterword to the Feminist Press reprint, the reader is referred to Judith Fetterley, "'Checkmate': Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's The Silent Partner" in Legacy (1986), Susan K. Harris, chapter 7 of Nineteenth-Century American Women's Novels (1990), and Ann R. Shapiro Unlikely Heroines: Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers and the Woman Question (1987) for additional studies of The Silent Partner. The novel has also been of interest to earlier

women can avoid martyrdom and victimization by gaining control over their own relationships, by actively participating in the economic system of production, and by reforming the social and cultural structures that restrict individuals by gender and class.

The novel is centered on the life of Perley Kelso, the daughter of an industrialist, and her relationship with Sip Garth, a member of the working-class.⁸² In the course of the novel, Perley develops the ability to transcend the restrictions of both class and gender by learning from Sip how to see and hear the truth, and how to love unconditionally, without regard to surface beauty or deformity. The vehicle through which she gains this understanding is Sip's sister, Catty, who is deaf, dumb, nearly blind, unattractive, and mentally deficient. Catty is the antithesis of what a nineteenth-century lady should be. In addition to being poor and ignorant, her behavior is beyond the bounds of decency: she habitually drinks herself into oblivion, she is actively and illicitly sexual, and she is generally "queer." Like the Asian imp in Spofford's "The Amber Gods," Catty is uncontrollable. Because her behavior cannot be restrained by the rules of conventional society, she is rejected by it and forced to live outside its margins. Yet it is the society, not Catty, that is corrupt and sinful, and in the end, it is Catty who is transformed into a Christlike figure of redemption.⁸³

scholars of the economic, political, and realistic novel, such as Vernon L. Parrington, Jr., Main Currents of American Thought, vol. 3, The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America: 1860-1920 (1930) and Van Wyck Brooks, New England: Indian Summer 1865-1915 (1940).

⁸² The name "Perley" calls to mind both the pearl, a symbol rich in associations, and Phelps's name, with the repetition of the letters p, e, and r. Phelps used the name Perley again in a later novel, The Successors of Mary the First (1901), about an invalid wife Perley Peace Hollis and her maids, which Kessler has read as autobiographical. The significance of the name Sip Garth is less clear, although the short Sip is close to being a reverse echo of the name Phelps. It is more notable that the working class girl has the same surname and general physical description as George Eliot's Mary Garth, another working class heroine whom some have read as a reflection of her author. As previously noted, Phelps greatly admired Eliot and the two authors corresponded during this period. Since Middlemarch and The Silent Partner both were published in 1871, the nature and direction of any possible influence is not clear. Perhaps the two writers intentionally created similar characters with the same name as a way of representing their connection with each other.

⁸³ In the critical studies of this novel that have been published to date, Catty is either ignored completely or mentioned only in passing. No one has recognized or examined her significance.

In a stylistic reflection of the nature of Perley's conventional middle-class life, Phelps opens her novel with a light and ironic tone, in which she playfully informs her reader that it is unnecessary to give more than three lines of description for her heroine, plus an account of the weather for context, as introduction. Even though, she acknowledges, "high art" would have provided at least three chapters of description, she justifies her pointedly brief introduction on the basis that there is as little to say about the twenty-three year old daughter of a gentleman manufacturer who lives in Boston as there would be about "a pansy-bed in the sun" (9). Perley has been bred to be simple, mindless, and pretty. At this point in her life, she is well on her way to fulfilling society's definition of "a true woman." Consequently, the narrator slyly suggests, her personality and appearance are already familiar to the reader and need no further description. She is a type, having no unique character of her own.

Nevertheless, having said this, the narrator continues to make light fun of her heroine by painting a verbal picture of Perley as a model of beauty and grace within a privileged social context, a suitable object for the admiring gaze of others, whose environment buffers her from anything outside herself that could cause either a disturbing thought or an objectionable feeling:

[S]he was sitting in her father's library, with her hands folded . . . as she had been sitting all the opaque, gray afternoon, in a crimson chair by a crimson fire, a creamy profile and a creamy hand lifted and cut between the two foci of color. The profile had a level, generous chin. The hand had--rings.

There are people who never do anything that is not worth watching; they cannot eat an apple or button a shoe in an unnoticeable, unsuggestive manner. If they undertake to be awkward, they do it so symbolically that you feel in debt to them for it. Miss Kelso may have been one of these indexical persons. . . .

She had noticed in an idle way, swathed to the brain in her folds of heat and color, that the chromatic run of drops upon a window, duly deadened by drawn damask, and adapted nicely

to certain conditions of a cannell blaze, had a pleasant sound. Accurately, she had not found herself to be the possessor of another thought since dinner; she had dined at three. (10-11)

Like "The Tenth of January," The Silent Partner is a narrative about seeing beneath surfaces. As a heroine, however, Perley is almost the exact opposite of Asenath Martyn. Because of her deformity, Sene had been forced to see others as they truly were. In contrast, because she herself meets society's standards for beauty and grace, Perley Kelsey must learn from others how to see and hear the truth. The event that first sparks a change in Perley is her chance encounter with the working girl, Sip Garth. Perley first sees Sip struggling on foot in the rain as she herself rides in her carriage to the theater in Boston:

She [Perley] . . . followed with some interest, having nothing else to do, the manful struggles of a girl in a plaid dress, who battled with the gusts about a carriage-length ahead of her, for perhaps half a dozen blocks. This girl struck out with her hands as a boxer would; sometimes she pommelled with her elbows and knees like a desperate prize-fighter. . . (17)

While Perley had been presented to the reader as the model of what a young lady of her class should be, Sip is described in terms that suggest working-class masculinity. Phelps does not take gender crossing to the extreme that Davis did in "Life in the Iron Mills," in which Hugh Wolfe is described explicitly as a "girl-man," but the implication is that since Sip does not act like a "true woman," a status afforded only to the middle class, she must be acting like a man. This conflation of gender and class was certainly conscious on Phelps's part, as was her association between class and race, for while the middle-class Perley is described as having a "creamy" complexion, her whiteness is contrasted with the "brown little face" of the working-class Sip (54).⁸⁴

⁸⁴ As noted earlier, Sip Garth shares her dark coloring with Eliot's Mary Garth. However, in the context of late-nineteenth-century industrial America, a dark complexion carried the suggestion of southern European immigrant laborers as well as African-Americans who had immigrated north after the emancipation and, as such, evoked an awareness of racial differences.

Given the importance of clear sight in this narrative, it is significant that Sip's first words are a challenge to Perley for staring at her: "'What do you want of me? and what were you staring at?'" (22). Perley responds by asking permission to gaze some more: "'Sit down on the steps,' said Miss Kelso, 'and let me look at you. I do not often see people like you'" (23).⁸⁵ What Perley at first sees, however, is only a poor girl of an inferior class who is to be pitied. She gets her first lesson in seeing beneath surfaces from Sip that evening when the working girl lectures her on the relationship between the respectable theater and the disreputable dance hall:

"[I]t's the plating over that's the difference; the plating over. At the Plum we say what we mean; and we mean bad enough very like. We're rough and we're out with it. Up at this place they're in with it. They plate over. The music plates over. The people plate over. It's different from us, and it ain't different from us. Don't you see? No, you don't. I do. But you'd ought to,--you'd ought to" (30).

The next significant event in Perley's transformation is the accidental death of her father, the co-owner of the Hayle and Kelso Mills in Five Falls, who is crushed at a freight depot. This death, which forcibly destroys the structure that had supported Perley's pampered life, brings her to Five Falls to meet with her father's business partner and his son, who happens also to be her fiance. By coincidence, at around the same time, Sip's father, a different kind of patriarchal figure, a drunk who had beaten both of his daughters and, we are meant to understand, sexually abused Catty, has been smashed in the gearing of the machinery and also killed. Consequently, Sip shows up as a worker at the Hayle and Kelso Mills and the stage is set for the two women to meet again. We might interpret this series of events as suggesting that in order to break down class and gender barriers, it is necessary to "kill off" the fathers and thereby eliminate the patriarchal forces that overdefine, by either

⁸⁵ This exchange of looks, especially Perley's desire to stare at the working-class Sip because of her difference, brings to mind the exchange between Mitchell and Wolfe in "Life in the Iron Mills."

protecting or oppressing, their daughters' lives.⁸⁶ Following a second conversation with Sip, in which she begins to learn about the reality of life for mill workers, Perley becomes eager to participate actively in running the mill in which she has just inherited a partnership. However, she must first challenge the men remaining in her life, her fiancé and his father, who have a conventional expectation that they will step in and assume her father's role as her caretaker. Paternalistically, they are unable to imagine allowing her to participate in managing even her own affairs, let alone the firm's. When they laugh at her plans to assume her place as a real partner, Perley begins to understand the limits placed on women of her own class and "[f]or the first time in her life, she was inclined to feel ashamed of being a woman." Her protest that "one need not be a child because one is a woman" results only in a patronizing explanation of her "privileged" status as "a silent partner" (59-60).

Following this humiliating experience, Perley takes the extraordinary step of crossing the boundaries that define her own social world in order to visit her new acquaintance, Sip. Before looking at this central and pivotal scene, I want to focus on a rhetorical device that Phelps employs in the beginning of the chapter when her narrator introduces the reader to the life of the mill workers. Using the narrator, who speaks directly to the reader in the second person in a way that is suggestive of the opening of "Life in the Iron Mills," Phelps sets up a series of paragraphs each of which begins: "If you are one of 'the hands' in the Hayle and Kelso Mills. . . ." She then goes on to describe the life of "the hands," thereby creating a strong identification between the middle-class reader who is being addressed and the working-class "other" who is being described. In addition, by literalizing the metonym, "hand," as a signifier for the mill worker, Phelps suggests that capitalism and the factory structure deconstruct and, in effect, deform, human beings who, it is implied by omission, also have "hearts" and "heads."⁸⁷ Further, as she

⁸⁶ Kessler argues that both Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, mother and daughter, were in awe of the power represented by their fathers. Given the role of fathers in the younger Phelps's fiction, however, this adulation must have been mixed with resentment and rebellion.

⁸⁷ Dickens uses the same metonymic device in *Hard Times* (1854), a possible influence on Phelps.

creates an identification between the reader and the worker, she presents the machinery of the mill as if it were a raging beast, or perhaps a raging man, being tamed by the voice of a singing woman:

[Y]ou seem almost to see . . . the machinery fall into a fit of rage. That is a sight. . . . How it throws its arms about, what fists it can clench, how it shakes at the elbows and knees, what teeth it knows how to gnash, how it writhes and roars, how it clutches at the leaky, strangling gas-lights, and how it bends its impotent black head, always, at last, without fail, and your song sweeps triumphant, like an angel, over it. (76)⁸⁸

At this point, the narration shifts back to the third person, and both narrator and reader again assume the position of invisible witnesses as Sip Garth goes to her home after a day of work at the mills. There we are all surprised when she is greeted by Perley who has arrived in her home before her and has built, for Sip's comfort, a fire, a symbol of shared domesticity that is, significantly, the first that Perley has ever made by herself.⁸⁹ The scene that follows is a moving account of how two women, who are separated by class and circumstances but who inexplicably care about each other, struggle to understand the realities of each other's lives. The thing that literally stands between them, while also providing them the opportunity to truly connect, is Sip's sister, Catty.

In an earlier chapter, Sip, whose entire life has been devoted to caring for Catty, who she has loved without reservation or condition, had tried reluctantly to tell Perley the truth about her sister: "'Catty was born deaf--and,' half under her breath, 'and--queer, and dumb'" (52). Sip attributes Catty's deformities to the excessive hard labor mother had been forced to undertake in the mills when she was pregnant, as well as to her father's violence. Now,

⁸⁸ This image of the machinery as a raging beast evokes the end of "The Tenth of January." The scene may also be a reference to Harriet Spofford's short story, "Circumstance," in which a woman's singing pacifies a black panther that threatens her life.

⁸⁹ Phelps presents Perley's entrance into Sip's house as an act of love; she apparently intended no critical comment on the more privileged girl's assumption of the right to enter a working-class house unannounced.

having entered Sip's world, Perley must confront who and what Catty is and Sip must expose a part of herself to an outsider. When Perley says "'I don't understand about Catty,'" Sip at first responds by assuming the distance between them cannot be bridged: "'Miss Kelso,' her hands folding and unfolding restlessly, 'there's things you couldn't understand'" (83). But when she has to admit that she had been turned out of the company housing because of Catty, she is forced to explain why:

"I told you there's things you couldn't understand. Now there ain't one of my own kind of folks, your age, wouldn't have understood half an hour ago, and saved me the trouble of telling. Catty's queer, don't you see? She runs away, don't you see? Sometimes she drinks, don't you understand? Drinks herself the dead kind. That ain't so often. Most times she just runs away about streets. There's something she does--worse."

"Worse?" The young lady's pure, puzzled face dropped suddenly. "O, I was very dull! I am sorry. I am not used--" (84-5)

Despite this revelation, a reference to sexual degradation that would have been expected to horrify any respectable middle-class girl, Perley, though developing "a sick look about the lips," apologizes for her ignorance and expresses genuine sympathy for Sip's sister. When Catty returns home and Perley is introduced to her for the first time, the description we receive through her eyes is far more clinical and harsh than Sip's, based as it is upon Catty's physical characteristics, unmediated as yet by love:

A girl possibly of fifteen years,--a girl with a low forehead, with wandering eyes, with a dull stoop to the head, with long, lithe, magnetic fingers, with a thick, dropping under lip,--a girl walled up and walled in from that labyrinth of sympathies, that difficult evolution of brain from beast, the gorgeous peril of that play at good and evil which we call life, except at the wandering eyes, and at the long, lithe, magnetic fingers. An ugly girl. (86)⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Within 20 years, these physical characteristics would have marked Catty as being an innate criminal type, according to elaborate statistical studies published in the 1890's by

The climax of this chapter comes when the full truth about Catty's nature is revealed to both Sip and Perley, who each, in different ways, are finally able to come to terms with this queer and deformed figure, and through her to begin to trust each other.

The young lady and Catty were standing now, between the lamp-glow and the fire-glow, side by side. They were a startling pair to be standing side by side. They stood quite still, except that Catty passed her fingers curiously over Miss Kelso's dress,--it seemed that she saw quite as much with her fingers as with her eyes,--and that she nodded once or twice, as if she were talking to herself, in a stupid way. Perley's fine, fair, finished smile seemed to blot out this miserable figure, and to fill the room with a kind of dazzle.

"Good God!" cried Sip, sharply. "You asked me for the difference. Look at that! You asked what difference the dirt makes. That's the difference! To be born in it, breathe it, swallow it, grow on it, live it, die and go back to it--bah! If you want to go the devil, work in the dirt. Look at her!"

"I look at her," said Perley, with a solemn, frightened look upon her young face,--"I look at her, Sip. For love's sake. Believe me if you can. Make her understand. I look for love's sake."

Is it possible? Is Miss Kelso sure? Not for a whim's sake? Not for fancy's sake? Not for the sake of an idle moment's curiosity? Not to gratify an eccentric taste,--playing my Lady Bountiful for a pretty change in a pretty life? Look at her; it is a very loathsome under lip. Look well at her; they are not pleasant eyes. An ugly girl,--a very ugly girl. For love's sake, Miss Kelso?
(87-88)

Lombroso and Ferrero. In addition to sharing a particular set of bodily signs, such as those attributed to Catty, born criminals were also thought to have weaker senses, especially of sight and hearing. It is possible that Phelps was aware of earlier studies that drew the same conclusions. It should also be noted that the nineteenth century considered touch to be the lowest of the senses, hence Catty's long fingers may have had a negative significance.

In this epiphanic scene, everyone's perceptions are intensified and altered. Sip, whose devoted and unconditional love for Catty tends to blur her flaws, is forced for the first time to see her through the eyes of Perley. As she does so, she sees not only her sister, but an exaggerated reflection of herself. In this moment, Sip is in danger of falling into the self-loathing that Asenath felt when she looked into her mirror. But, in The Silent Partner, there is no man in the next room gazing adoringly at the portrait of a pretty woman. Instead, there is a woman who is capable of seeing beneath an ugly surface. Sip is saved from experiencing abjection and defeat because the other gazer, whose affection she desires, is not a man seeking shallow pleasure in pretty things, but a woman who can see beyond Catty's deformity into her soul.

Perley, who had never before been exposed to anyone like Catty, also has had her eyes opened in a profound way. For the first time in her life, she is truly able to see under the plating, as Sip had called it. By learning from Sip to look at Catty "for love's sake," Perley is able to transcend the limitations that class and gender had imposed upon her. Moreover, by truly seeing Catty, Perley also truly sees herself for the first time, for like Sip, she sees her own reflection in the "queer" girl. As Perley and Catty stand next to each other, one born into beauty and grace, the other into ugliness and deformity, "a startling pair to be side by side," a physical connection is established between them. Perley has just been ridiculed by the men she had trusted to love her. She has just been told that she can be no more than a "silent partner," that her place is limited to the home and that her gender keeps her separate from the activities that engage the rest of the world. This girl who had never before had a care in the world has just been given reason to identify with the most unfortunate of outcasts, a girl who is deaf and mute.

I want to pass over the rest of the novel quickly by indicating, with just a few broad strokes, how the plot is carried forward. How Perley gets to know the eight-year-old boy, Bub Mell, who works illegally in the Hayle and Kelso Mills, and who is later mangled and killed in the machinery while trying to cop some tobacco. How Old Bijah Mudge, a workingman and a social activist, loses his position with the Mills because he testified about the poor conditions of the worker to the Massachusetts legislature, and how he is blacklisted and ends up half crazy in an almshouse, thinking he is talking to

trees, until Perley listens to him and befriends him. How once Perley experiences real love for Sip and Catty, she also realizes that she does not love Maverick Hayle, the son of her father's partner, and so breaks off their engagement. How Stephen Garrick, a basically good man who had been born into the working class, is taken on as a new partner in the place of Perley's father, and how he falls in love with Perley who, despite her affection for him, refuses his proposal of marriage because "I have too much else to do. . . . I cannot spare the time for it" and because "I have been a silent partner long enough . . . I have a preference for a business of my own" (260, 262). How Perley brings members of the working class into her home to mingle with her friends from high society, and to be introduced to literature, art, and music. How these working-class people are labeled by a wealthy matron as "poor Perley's freaks" (237).⁹¹

I pass over this material quickly in order to return to the deformed figure of Catty. Two thirds of the way through the novel, Catty is diagnosed as going blind. Being already deaf and dumb, blindness leaves the girl with only her lowly sense of touch with which to negotiate her way in the world. The news is devastating to Sip and the sympathy provided by Perley brings the two women even closer together:

"If I can do anything for you--" said Perley, gently.

Sip held up her hands and her brown face.

"Do you suppose," she said, "that you could--kiss me?"

Perley sat down in the wooden rocking-chair and held out her beautiful arms.

Sip crept in like a baby, and there she began to cry. She cried and cried.

⁹¹ As I noted in the previous chapter, the earliest dictionary entry for the American use of the word "freak" as a slang term to refer to a person being exhibited in a side show or "museum" because of physical anomalies is found in 1883. The more standard definition of the word is to denote an unusual natural phenomenon. Phelps seems here to be using the word with its American slang meaning.

"My dear!" said Perley, crying too. (189-90)

It is, however, in her death that Catty serves most powerfully as an agent for change. As Elijah Mudge has predicted, an apocalyptic event is about to occur. Heavy rains have threatened to flood the town of Five Falls, and to make matters much worse, a million feet of logs upstream, further evidence of the willingness of men to destroy other living things to satisfy their own greed, threaten to break loose.⁹² As the flood threatens the town, Catty begins to feel restless and discontent. In a physical acting out of her social circumstances, she begins to walk in circles and cries out in frustration to Sip: "I can't go round and go round. Who will stop me, Sip?" (268). Later, she wakes Sip in the night to ask her who made her deaf ears, her blind eyes, and her mute mouth. When Sip explains that God made them, Catty taps out with her fingers the question, "'Did he do it for love's sake? . . . I can't find out. Did he do it for love's sake, Sip?'" (270). The next day, in the midst of the storm, Catty becomes disoriented and leaves the safety of the house. For the first and only time in the novel, the narration is given Catty's perspective and we are given the opportunity to experience the world as she does, trying to figure out what is happening through touch alone, without the benefit of sight and hearing. Growing afraid, Catty goes out in search of Sip and mistakenly wanders onto the bridge just as the runaway timber hits. The perspective shifts back to the narrator who teaches us the meaning of the event as if she were explicating a biblical parable:

Type of the world from which she sprang,--the world of exhausted and corrupted body, of exhausted and corrupted brain, of exhausted and corrupted soul, the world of the laboring poor as man has made it, and as Christ has died for it, of a world deaf, dumb, blind, doomed, stepping confidently to its own destruction before our eyes,--Catty stood for a moment still, a

⁹² In addition to being a feminist, Phelps also actively supported the preservation of the environment and the prevention of cruelty to animals through her writings and her actions. In her autobiography, she placed the treatment of animals as "the 'next' great moral question" (251).

little perplexed, it seemed, feeling about her patiently in the spray-sown, lighted air.

One beck of a human hand would save her; but she could not see it. One cry would turn her; but her ears were sealed.
(277-8)

As Sip watches helplessly, Perley puts her arms around her and Dick covers her eyes. After the logs hit the bridge, two are left: "They had caught transversely, and hung like a cross" (278). Swept to her death from the bridge, a cross remaining where she had stood, the metaphor of Catty as a bridge between Sip and Perley is literalized in a final image of transcendence.

Following Catty's death, Phelps quickly ends the novel, devoting the final two chapters to an account of its effect on Sip and Perley. The final chapter is set sometime after the main events. Sip has become a street preacher through whom, she believes, the spirit of the mute Catty now speaks:

The little preacher had a wandering style, as most such preachers have. Such a style can no more be caught on the point of a pen than the rustle of crisp leaves or the aroma of dropping nuts. There was a syntax in Sip's brown face and bent hands and poor dress and awkward motions. There were correctness and perspicuity about that old doorstep. The muddy little court was an appeal, the square of sky above her head a peroration. In that little court Sip was eloquent. Here on the parlor sofa, in clean cuffs and your slippers, she harangues you. (295)

In giving voice to the uneducated working girl, Sip, Phelps may have been commenting on her own situation as a woman struggling to become a writer. The language of the final sentence suggests that she may have been expressing her own artistic insecurities, fearing the harsh judgements of men like her father who she imagines to be sitting in judgement, in the safety of their parlors, criticizing her work as a "harangue." Nevertheless, she insists that the sermons of the working-class girl, rough and unpolished as they are, are suitable for the workers in the courtyard for whom they are intended.

Despite the dark color of her face and the awkwardness of her body, despite her lack of gentility and her undisciplined style, Sip's preaching follows an inherent order, eloquence, and rightness that goes beyond conventional standards because it is inspired by real feelings and true faith rather than by artificial rules and literary flourishes.

While Sip employs words to bring her own people to Christ, Perley goes out into the world among the poor whom she has grown to consider her friends, helping when and where she can through her generosity. She describes herself to her former friends as a guide to right feeling rather than to right deeds, able, through her sensitivity, to get the world back on the right track: "I am not a reformer; . . . I am only a feeler. The world gets into the dark once in a while, you know; throws out a few of us for groping purposes.'" (241) By refusing to marry and by actively engaging in a kind of social work among the poor, Perley has soundly rejected the role of "silent partner." She has been transformed from a protected girl whose surface beauty and grace made her an attractive but insubstantial object to look upon into an independent woman whose deep love for others and involvement in the world is physically manifested in her face. In contrast to her appearance at the beginning of the novel, when she was defined by the objects around her, she now has "a womanly, wonderful face. . . a 'suited' face. It begged for nothing. It was opulent and warm. Life brimmed over at it" (302). By rejecting the role of the traditional heroine who conforms to the limits set for women by society, Phelps created in Perley Kelso a new kind of heroine who has become both beautiful and "a true woman."

The Silent Partner is an extraordinary work which demonstrates the power of women to transform themselves and those around them through their compassion and love for each other. By becoming friends, Perley Kelso and Sip Garth are each able to transcend the limits set by society for their gender and class, and to develop into effective and independent women capable of changing those limits for others. But what about Catty? Like Rebecca Harding Davis's Deborah, upon whom she is modeled, Catty is meant to be read as a "real body," whose deformities are the result of the oppressive social conditions that stunt and maim the lives of the working-class poor. However, Phelps also gave Catty a burden of symbolic meaning

that is far more explicit than that Davis imposed upon her character. In a direct exegesis of her own text, Phelps explains that Catty is the type of all the poor and oppressed who have been rendered deaf, dumb, blind, and powerless by an exploitative and greedy society (277).⁹³ In addition, through her use of explicit Christian imagery, Phelps presents Catty as a Christlike figure whose death opens the gates of salvation to the poor through the preaching of her sister, Sip (278, 291).

In the feminist Christian world so consciously and conscientiously constructed by Phelps, deformity itself is a kind of martyrdom that serves as a path to redemption. In "The Tenth of January," Asenath's deformity enables her to overcome her self-loathing and her selfishness. By sacrificing her life for that of her inferior rival and comforting a dying child in her arms as she herself is about to die, Sene Martyn becomes a martyr, whose image evokes both Christ and the Madonna. In The Silent Partner, Catty Garth, through her deformities and her death, provides a Christlike bridge that helps the more normal women, Sip and Perley, to love and trust each other. By learning to see Catty clearly and to love her unconditionally in spite of her defects, both women gain the ability to break the barriers of gender and class that would have curtailed their own development and their ability to serve others. Perley is transformed from a typical upper-middle-class product of nineteenth-century American capitalism and paternalism who is shallow, spoiled, selfish, and oblivious to the world around her, into a mature woman who refuses to be controlled by men and who devotes herself to the improvement of life for others. Through her love for Sip and Catty, Perley gains the strength to speak out and refuse to be a silent partner. Sip, by becoming a street preacher, gives her own voice to Catty and in doing so transforms her anger and bitterness into a force for redemption and change. What began with deformity, pain, and abjection is transformed into Christian love and moral responsibility through the agency of a healing and bonding love between women.

⁹³ Ann R. Shapiro, one of the few critics to mention Catty at all, nonetheless limits her reading to the most literal interpretation of Phelps's words, stating that "Catty symbolizes the hopeless mill hands who can neither fully understand nor express their misery" (45). While this is one aspect of her significance, Phelps also means for us to understand that Catty symbolizes the oppressed condition of all women.

These meanings are all located within the text and are, I believe, intended by its author. However, we have seen throughout this study that deformed characters often play a role that goes beyond the necessities of plot or the parameters of meaning contained in the texts in which they appear. As deformed counterparts or reflections of a narrative's more "normal" protagonists, these figures also can be read as projections of the author's own anxieties about her writing, her gender identity, and her sexuality. Whatever else she represents, Catty occupies a profoundly important position in the narrative as a deformed reflection of the more "normal" main characters, Sip and Perley, an imaging of their least acceptable qualities. Despite the pathos of her life, Catty is more than a victim of industrialism who is unable to hear or see, and who dies a martyr. She is queer and angry and out of control. She is "a sullen, ill-tempered, ill-controlled, uncontrollable Catty dear as one could ask to see" (85). Like the Asian imp in "The Amber Gods," Catty embodies the rage and rebellion that Phelps was not able to locate in either Sip or Perley, each of whom were more easily identified with herself. Like Deborah in "Life in the Iron Mills," she is the victim of an oppressive society, as all women are victims of a society ruled by men; but like Deborah, she also is capable of being a witch as well as a victim, and her powers are not all benign. Like Asenath Martyn, Catty is forced by her appearance to be an outsider who is rejected by conventional society. Although she is literally unable to see her own deformed appearance, as Sene did when she gazed at her image in the mirror, she serves as a mirror for both her sister, Sip, and for Perley. Both Asenath and Catty signify the fear shared by all women, especially those who dare to challenge conventional definitions of womanhood, that they will encounter a hideous monster when they gaze into the mirror. Unlike Asenath, who is willing to be a martyr, Catty responds to being pushed to the margins of society with rage, not submission, and so, by extension, do Perley and Sip. Consequently, Phelps goes further than she could in "The Tenth of January" in presenting a feminist solution to oppression. Despite, or rather because of, Catty's sacrificial death, The Silent Partner ends in empowerment, not martyrdom.

I believe that the image of monstrous deformity embodied in Catty also had a personal significance for Phelps. No matter how successful and popular

she was as a writer, Phelps felt herself to be outside the boundaries that defined normal behavior for women of her time. Even though a few American women had been rebelling against the restrictions imposed upon their gender even before the Civil War, the expectation that "true" women would subordinate themselves to their fathers and then their husbands, and devote all their energies to creating and maintaining a comfortable home for men was still generally held as late as the turn of the century. Moreover, the cult of true womanhood, as it has come to be known, was closely associated throughout this period with the teachings of the Christian churches, including the Puritan tradition into which Phelps was born. Her own mother had been, she was sure, a victim of it. Yet, despite the power of these social and personal forces, Phelps was, throughout most of her life, unwilling to conform to traditional views of what it meant to be "a true woman." She fought against conventional gender roles in her fiction and other writings, as well as in the way she lived her private life.⁹⁴

Even as a child, according to her autobiography, she had been "very much a tomboy," and she recalls with some pride her "contempt" when told by "a queer old man" that "little girls should not walk on fences" (Chapters 20). She would walk on fences and climb trees too, when she chose. She also was committed, from an early age, to make her own contribution to literature or, as she put it, "to do some honest, hard work of my own in the World Beautiful, and for it" (Chapters 66). Phelps believed steadfastly that she had her own work to do in the world and she was not willing to abandon it by merging her life with a man's. Nor did she have to. Because of the success of The Gates Ajar and its sequels, as well as her ability to consistently publish her articles and stories in the well-paying magazines, she was able to support herself adequately without the assistance of a husband and she was even able to build herself a house in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where she lived from

⁹⁴ Phelps's political understanding of the forces responsible for suppressing women developed around 1869 or 70 when she was in her mid-twenties. Not long after that she began to publish essays with titles like "Unhappy Girls" (1871), "Women and Money" (1871), "The True Woman" (1871), "A Few Words to the Girls" (1872), and "The 'Female Education' of Women" (1873). She also gave lectures on women's rights to various groups, and circulated letters and petitions soliciting support and funds for women's causes. David S. Reynolds reports that when an appeal came to Emily Dickinson in 1872, "she burned Phelps's letter and mailed her a flat refusal" (423).

May to November. She remained unmarried until she was forty-four-- throughout her most productive years.

Phelps's commitment to women and to women's rights was firmly grounded in her own deepest emotions. In an 1878 letter to the poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, she wrote, "I love women as, I think, all women do not love their own kind, and it seems to me that I understand them because I love them. Always I find the deepest tenderness in the strongest woman; there, too, the largest self-sacrifice and the most faithful friend" (Coultrap-McQuin 181). These feelings were echoed in a less sentimental way in her novel, Doctor Zay (1882), whose title character is a woman doctor in rural Maine. In the following excerpt, one of her female characters comments about two kinds of women, those who need men and those who love women, and she makes a connection between these affectional preferences and the ability of men to subordinate women:

"Don't you know there are women that can't get through this valley without men folks, in some shape or 'nother? If there ain't one round, they're as miserable as a peacock deprived of society that appreciates spread-feathers. You know the kind I mean: if it ain't a husband, it's a flirtation; if she can't flirt, she adores her minister. I always said I didn't blame 'em, ministers and doctors and all those privileges, for walkin' right on over women's necks. It isn't in human nature to take the trouble to step off the thing that's under foot. Now, then! There are women that love women, Mr. Yorke, care for 'em, grieve over 'em, worry about 'em, feel a fellow feeling and a kind of duty to 'em, and never forget they're one of 'em, misery and all,--and nonsense too, may be, if they hadn't better bread to set; and they lift up their strong arms far above our heads, sir, like statues I've read of that lift up temples, and carry our burdens for love of us, God bless 'em!--and I wouldn't think much of him if he didn't!" (88)

In her own life and in her fiction, Elizabeth Phelps strongly rejected the conventional notion of "the true woman" as the kind who are unable to live without men. Although her version of feminism incorporated a vision of

women as morally and spiritually superior to men that was not a radical departure from conventional Victorian ideology, what set Phelps apart from the mores of her time were her personal belief in the power of women's love for each other, and her conclusion that since men were both incompetent and dangerous, political and economic as well as social and moral power should be in the control of morally superior women.

When Phelps built her house in Gloucester in 1876, she described it in a letter to her friend and fellow writer, George Eliot, as a haven for women: "I keep an old maid's Paradise [and] spend the summer with my maid, my dog, and my friends" (Kessler 59).⁹⁵ This house and its residents provided the material for a humorous book which she titled Old Maid's Paradise (1879), about a single woman named Corona living in the house of her married brother who decides that she wants her own home and proceeds to build one. Although Corona violates gender norms by having neither the ability nor the inclination to housekeeping, she is accompanied by her servant, Puella Virginia (virgin girl), nicknamed Puelvir (maid-man), who keeps everything running smoothly while Corona and her friend, Mary, are able to enjoy a variety of outdoor activities usually reserved for men. In this paradise, women lead lives of self-sufficiency while men, such as the Raspberry Man who proposes to Puelvir and Mr. Sinuous who tries to marry Mary, are threats and intruders.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ In recognition of her friendship with Eliot, Phelps named her dog Daniel Deronda. She told an amusing story in her autobiography about a little neighbor boy who asked his mother if her house was "where the Derondas live?" confirming that though the little dog was the only masculine member of the household, even seven pounds of his "lordly sex . . . orders our identity away from us" (197). Phelps considered Eliot to be the woman writer best able to produce "a great novel to proclaim the royal lineage of the Coming Woman to the average mind," as she wrote to her in 1873, after the publication of Middlemarch (Kessler 86). Even though Phelps hated speaking in public, feeling like "a solitary disabled gladiator" before an audience as she herself put it, she presented a series of lectures on "Representative Modern Fiction" which focused on the works of Eliot at Boston University in 1876, making her the first woman to lecture at this new coeducational institution and perhaps the first American woman to give a series of lectures in an American university (Chapters 254). The relationship between Eliot and Phelps is deserving of further study.

⁹⁶ Henry James may have had this book or Phelps's actual Gloucester home in mind when he wrote The Bostonians six years later, notably the scene set at an all-female summer beach home near Boston where Olive takes Verena until Basil's intrusion forces them to leave.

Just as the setting of Old Maid's Paradise was based on Phelps's own home in Gloucester, so the characters seem to have been modeled on real women in her life. In reality, Phelps had a devoted maid who accompanied her to Gloucester each year. She also had a close and intimate relationship throughout this period with Dr. Mary Briggs Harris, a woman doctor from Andover, whose brother was to become President of Amherst College (Bennett 65). We know that Phelps also shared work space with Mary Briggs Harris in Andover. She is the most likely model for the fictional "Mary" in Old Maid's Paradise, and is probably the maternal figure Phelps cited in her autobiography as "the lady who mothered my home," who along with "the maid who served it" and the dog, Daniel Deronda, made up "my family" (197).

So far, in building a biographical context for Phelps's work, I have emphasized her self-sufficiency and her strength. There was, however, another side to her life. Like many women of her time, Phelps suffered from nervous disorders which were at times debilitating. The progression of Phelps's poor health has been documented by Bennett who reports that Phelps suffered a major physical breakdown when she left school at sixteen, being threatened with tuberculosis and suffering from a heart ailment. A few years later, in 1867, just as The Gates Ajar was being published, Phelps wrote in a letter to the poet Lucy Larcom that she led "a cramped invalid life" (Bennett 63). Phelps suffered another mental and physical breakdown when The Silent Partner was published in 1871. Kessler found a reference to Phelps's poor health in a weekly column, "Concerning Women," in the Woman's Journal for March 26, 1871, which attributes the writer's condition to "indefatigable study and a New England nervous organization." She also cites a letter Phelps wrote in 1873 stating that her health collapsed after the publication of The Silent Partner, which she had completed "in spite of her physician's objection" (Kessler 51). In 1884, in her authorized biographical chapter on Phelps in Our Famous Women, Spring refers to "the baffling, almost crushing, hindrance of ill-health" suffered by her subject (580).

According to Phelps's account of her physical condition in her autobiography, the primary symptom of her disorder was chronic insomnia. In the following excerpt, she describes in painful detail the onset of a serious

breakdown following the 1877 publication of The Story of Avis, a book she considered close to her heart. Her account gives a sense of her state of mind as initial bouts of sleeplessness and feelings of despair turn into “the rack of habitual insomnia”:

One slips into the door of the torture chamber, thinking it to be the entrance to some commonplace apartment, perhaps some pleasant room with broad views and easy exit. One turns to step out, on some natural errand--then, behold the bars, the bolts, the locks. Escape? Try the windows. They seem to hang a million feet above the solid earth; their grating is of metal never known before to the prisoner's chemistry, a relentless fibre, made from the pillars of the world. Weep if you will; pray, if you choose. But “God shut the door.” You will stay there till He opens it. (229)⁹⁷

Phelps's health continued to worsen as she grew older and a series of other ailments troubled her in her early forties. This period of her life was particularly difficult because of the loss of her brother in 1883 and of her friend, Mary Briggs Harris, in 1886. In reviewing her letters, Kessler has found that Phelps suffered an “acute illness” in February 1884, had a disabled hand in 1886, temporarily lost her sight in 1887, and suffered a sprained back and ankle in the same year (73, 80). Her eyes continued to bother her throughout the rest of her life. Bennett and Kessler both speculate that the loss of the two people on whom she relied for support coupled with her increasingly poor health were among the reasons Phelps finally decided to marry in 1888. She was forty-four years old and a well-known writer. Her husband, Herbert Dickinson Ward, a man she had known since he was a child, was twenty-seven and just finishing school. The marriage appears to have not been a success and within a short time the couple began to spend much of their time apart.

⁹⁷ Phelps's use of the image of imprisonment brings to mind the more literal rendering of the prison as a trope in a number of the other texts examined in this study, including Spofford's “Her Story,” Davis's “Life in the Iron Mills,” Gilman's “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and, to the extent that the burning mill becomes a torture chamber for those trapped within it, Phelps's own “The Tenth of January.”

The sense a modern reader gets from Phelps's descriptions of her illness is that she was subject from her girlhood to onsets of severe depression, characterized by anxiety and an inability to sleep. The record we have of Phelps's most severe attacks shows that they correlate with the publication dates of her most important literary works, suggesting that her emotional and physical crises were related to her writing. Kessler accounts for this by arguing that both Phelps and her mother shared a frustrated desire for male approval of their writings. She concludes that "Phelps followed her mother in her adulation of a patriarchal father, an earthly representative of Final Authority. Both women wished their writing to be approved by their fathers before anyone else. They unduly elevated both men--a fact that could only have made each woman feel inadequate" (18). While I agree with Kessler up to a point, we should not lose sight of the strength of Phelps's admiration for her mother, her emotional identification with women and distrust of men, and the power of her feminist political convictions. Unlike many of her predecessors, including, perhaps, her own mother, the younger Phelps was no passive worshipper of male authority. But, as I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, it seems plausible that as the daughter of a well-known and highly respected father who was a public opponent of women's rights, and a mother who died too young because, according to her daughter, she tried to be both a mother and a writer, Phelps was caught in a conflict between conformity and rebellion that she was never able to fully resolve. This conflict may well have provided the emotional force behind her early works like The Gates Ajar as well as "The Tenth of January" and The Silent Partner, but successful authorship alone could not resolve the anxiety she felt as she attempted to confront the authority represented by her father and other powerful men. Moreover, the enormous popularity that Phelps experienced as a result of her writing was matched by an onslaught of virulent attacks upon her character and her intentions that must have seemed overwhelming for a young writer. That her inner conflicts as a woman and a writer literally made her sick is not surprising.

Writing meant a lot to Phelps. It was more than a way of making a living, more than a means of self-expression. In her autobiography and letters, Phelps reveals her tremendous concern with writing well, suggesting

that her sense of self was connected to the quality of her work. She took extreme care in crafting even the “pot boiler” stories meant for the magazines. She writes in her autobiography: “It has always taken me at least from a month to six weeks to finish a magazine story. I confess that I ‘toil terribly’ over them” (267). A 1901 letter gives a similar account of the pains she took in her writing: “every word . . . I had wrought over and over, I should say thirty times, so that each stroke was in its place like an ivory painting, and is just as I want it to be” (Coultrap-McQuin 184). Extrapolating from comments like these, Kessler attributes Phelps's poor health to her inability to achieve the high standards she set for herself: “She set her hopes high yet felt herself inadequate. The resulting conflict expressed itself in her disabled body and allowed invalidism to become her rationale for missing the perfection after which, like the rest of her kin, she strove” (86).

As individually psychological as Phelps's ailments appear to be, they occurred in a specific cultural context that was preoccupied with women's illness. In Diane Price Herndyl's illuminating study, Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840-1940 (1993), she notes the apparently “epidemic proportions of nineteenth-century women's ‘illnesses,’” citing the numerous historians who have documented “the widespread cultural acceptance of women's innate unhealthiness” during this “nervous century” (21). Herndyl argues that this “cult of female frailty” is significant in understanding the political and social conditions of women in nineteenth-century America, since “the invalid, defined by her body and weakness, represents an exaggeration of one of the ‘natural’ definitions of all women” (8). In examining the reasons why invalidism among women seems to have become so prevalent, she builds upon Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's suggestion that “female illness may well have been a response to the overwhelming social and political changes of the mid-nineteenth century, a somaticization of the ‘disease’ of the anxiety, stress, and unhappiness women felt about the restrictions on their lives” (24).⁹⁸ This

⁹⁸ Although her interest is in examining the cultural construction of the meanings of illness in nineteenth-century America, Herndyl does not ignore the realities that existed as well. If it is indeed true that nineteenth-century women were unusually ill, one reason might have been the clothing they wore and the practice of reducing women's waists with tight corsets that actually deformed their internal organs. This invisible deformity, the result of an attempt to create an

cultural analysis dovetails with the personal circumstances in which Phelps found herself as a writer and feminist trying to force her own way in a particularly patriarchal environment.

Invalidism in the nineteenth century, while closely associated with women, was not exclusively a female phenomenon. In Sensational Designs, Jane Tompkins argues that illness was sometimes interpreted as being a sign of election, indicating the spirituality of the victim who could be a man or a woman. More broadly, poor health had been associated with an artistic sensibility for at least a century. That Phelps shared these romantic and religious views is clear from her fictional works, and her autobiographical and personal writings. In a long section of Chapters from a Life, in which she writes candidly about her battles with sickness, she places herself within a tradition of artistic invalidism, citing a number of fragile writers, including Robert Louis Stevenson, William Hazlett, Rose Terry Cooke, Thomas De Quincey, Guy de Maupassant, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In making the case that writers in general are unusually prone to poor health, she recounts the words of Longfellow who once told her that "'no truly sensitive man . . . can be perfectly well.' He might have added," she goes on to say, "that one of the cruelest problems of life is to make the perfectly well understand that he is not perfectly sensitive, and therefore may be disqualified from comprehension of those who are" (233). This association of sensitivity with illness, and the implication that those who enjoy good health cannot understand those who do not, establishes, in effect, an exclusive club of the elite who are bound and set apart from the masses by their bodily defects.

In the works of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, sensitivity and creativity join with invalidism and deformity in a martyrdom that is potentially redeeming while also being outside the margins of normality. Despite her attempts to legitimate her own ill health by associating invalidism with a predominantly male literary tradition, Phelps also understood that there was something wrong with her that was not wrong with "normal" people. This becomes

appearance of external beauty, replicates the situation described by Phelps in "The Tenth of January," in which the anthropomorphized mill was damaged by an unseen inner flaw. Among her other feminist crusades, Phelps was an early and active advocate of reform in women's clothing, writing a number of articles on the subject that were expanded into a book, What to Wear? (1873).

painfully clear in Chapters from a Life when she associates her invalidism not only with deformity but with criminality, categorizing those who are “physically disabled, or disordered,” like herself, with “the other defective classes, the criminal, the insane, the shiftless, the pauper” (236). Invalidism and insomnia cannot be simplistically read as equivalent to the disabilities and deformities that define and destroy the lives of Asenath Martyn and Catty Garth. However, both sickness and deformity are failures and flaws of the physical body that appear to be uncontrollable and that are inevitably misinterpreted by those who are not afflicted. Both make one a little “queer” in the eyes of other people whose bodies are “normal,” and while they give the afflicted the ability to be sensitive to others in pain, they also inflict intense personal suffering and a sometimes overwhelming sense of horror and abjection.

We can never know with any certainty the full range of individual circumstances and feelings that led Elizabeth Phelps to create characters in her early work whose physical deformities seem to reflect her own sense of social deviance. But it is clear that invalidism and deformity are complex signifiers in her writings. Despite her own self-defined identity as an invalid, Phelps did not often write about invalid women of her own class. While her middle-class male characters are often depicted as frail and invalid, her principle women characters are more often in perfectly good health--they might even be described as hearty. According to Herndl, two contradictory models of womanhood seem to have coexisted during the late nineteenth century: the “cult of female frailty” and “able-bodied womanhood” (25). While able-bodiedness seems to have been seen as desirable in real life, frailty was the dominant model in fiction. Against the grain of her times, Phelps reversed this cultural imperative in her fiction. For the most part, she created empowered heroines, like Perley and Sip, who were not only able-bodied but strong-minded, and she turned her male characters into invalids.⁹⁹ I suggest

⁹⁹ The most obvious example of role reversal is found in Phelps’s 1882 novel, Doctor Zay, about a woman doctor who nurses a man who has broken his leg. Phelps deliberately and explicitly plays with her reversal of normal gender expectations by having her heroine behaving like a man while her hero, to his shame, finds himself behaving like a woman. She also features invalid men in her two favorite novels, The Story of Avis (1877), in which the illness of Philip Ostrander signifies his emotional and spiritual weakness, and A Singular Life (1895), in which

that she was able to create this new kind of heroine by displacing female weakness and anxieties about deviance onto severely deformed female characters, such as Asenath Martyn and Catty Garth. Because these deformed characters were sacrificed in an act of willful or accidental martyrdom, they made it possible for a new able-bodied and empowered kind of heroine to survive and transcend the limits placed upon her by gender. By combining her religious beliefs with her feminist convictions, Phelps created a figure of deformity that was redemptive.

the poor health of the hero, Emanuel Bayard, serves as a sign of his moral and spiritual superiority, while reflecting Phelps's own struggles.

4. Abnormality and Rebellion: Mary E. Wilkins Freeman

Some of the darkest stories to emerge out of the American local color movement were written by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, a New Englander whose career spanned from 1881 to 1918.¹⁰⁰ Best known for her depictions of the mostly grim lives of ordinary people trapped in New England farms and villages during the latter part of the nineteenth century, Freeman became associated early in her career with the themes of sexual repression and excessive willfulness. Her most memorable stories are about women, many of them unmarried girls or old maids, who stand outside their society's vision of normality, and are seen by others, and even by themselves, as being emotionally deformed. Freeman was one of the first members of her generation to write explicitly about sexuality as it related to the lives of women as well as men. Clearly influenced by contemporary studies of the pathology of deviant sexuality, Freeman took as her principle subject the condition of the abnormal individual in society, especially the woman who is "unwomanly."

Sometime late in her life, Freeman wrote the following monologue spoken by an unmarried woman named Jane Lennox. The work, which was not published during her lifetime, is available only as a fragment but, although the narrative context is missing, what we have is startling in its unabashed expression of the pride of a woman who views her deviant unmarried condition as a defiance of convention that is, in its small way, almost heroic. By transforming a passive state of being into an act of rebellion, the voice of Jane Lennox marks a clear difference between an earlier Victorian view of the unmarried woman as a harmless and pathetic spinster, and a fin de siècle view of her as a monster and threat to the social order. More directly

¹⁰⁰ Although Mary Wilkins married late in life, when she was fifty, she adopted her married name for subsequent publications and that is the name most commonly used today by critics and biographers. Consequently, I use the name Freeman when referring to my subject's entire life and career, as well as to specific works written after her marriage. However, because she was unmarried for the first fifty years of her life when she wrote her best-known works, including all but one of the works discussed in this chapter, I use Wilkins when referring to specific events or works prior to her marriage. When clarity is needed, I use her full name.

than any of her American predecessors, Freeman captured the ferocity of that voice.

I am a rebel and what is worse a rebel against the Overgovernment of all creation. . . . I even dare to think that, infinitesimal as I am, . . . I, through my rebellion, have power. All negation has power. I, Jane Lennox, spinster, as they would have designated me a century ago, living quietly, and apparently harmlessly in the old Lennox homestead in Baywater, am a power.

I do not understand in what manner I am a power against the Whole, perhaps only through my antagonism toward the part. I do not imagine, I know, that my antagonism toward the little works definite harm. That I have proved. . . .

I often wonder if I might not have been very decent, very decent indeed, if I had laid hold on the life so many of my friends lead. If I had only had a real home of my own with a husband and children in it. That was my birthright, but I was deprived of it, with neither trade nor barter.

And another thing which was my birthright: the character of the usual woman. I am a graft on the tree of human womanhood. I am a hybrid. Sometimes I think I am a monster, and the worst of it is, I certainly take pleasure in it.

No mortal can exist without a certain satisfaction in herself. Satisfaction in myself I certainly have, or perhaps satisfaction may not be the right word. Perhaps pride is better, pride which intoxicates like forbidden stimulants. . . .

I sometimes wonder what would have been the state of the world, had it not been for the Tables of Stone. Once made they could not be broken. They were broken. They are broken now. Could the Devil have existed, even in the imagination of men, had it not been for those terrible and sacred Tables of the Law? Did he exist in the fullest sense before?

It is a pity that those tables could have been broken, that the will and strength of mortal man should have been sufficient to break them.

Here am I, a woman, rather delicately built, of rather delicate tastes, perfectly able to break those commandments, to convert to dust every one of those Divine laws. I shudder before my own power, yet I glory because of it.¹⁰¹

As the narrator slyly suggests at the end of this excerpt, one need not be a powerful male figure--a Satan or Prometheus--to challenge God's authority by defying his commandments.¹⁰² Although the monologue has a distinctly ironic ring, it also has a message that is deadly serious: the "rebel" who wages war against the "Overgovernment" of creation can take the form of a delicate spinster whose only apparent act of rebellion is her refusal (or inability) to live like a "normal" woman. Power, for such a being, lies in negation--in not doing what is expected. By simply living as a single woman--without a "real" home, husband, and children--this "graft on the tree of human womanhood" carries both the stigma of a freak and the power of a monster. Yet, for all her pride in being a destructive force in the universe, she questions whether she might have been better off had she been able to lead a normal life, and casts doubt on the extent of her own agency, wondering whether her deviance is an act of will or whether she has been "deprived" of her "birthright" because she has been born a "hybrid," a freak of nature.

¹⁰¹ Edward Foster, Freeman's first biographer, was given this manuscript by Freeman's cousin, Mrs. A. B. Mann of Randolph, Massachusetts. Carrie and her husband Arthur, a New York cotton broker, were Freeman's closest companions from 1926 until her death in 1930. Apparently, the manuscript was neither titled nor dated. I quote all but two paragraphs of the text provided by Foster in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (142-3).

¹⁰² Freeman of course would have been familiar with the works of Milton and Shelley. There is also a suggestion of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein in this passage. What is original with Freeman is placing the supernatural power of a Satan, Prometheus, and, assuming she was familiar with it, Frankenstein's monster into the body of a woman, especially one who is unmarried. At the end of this chapter, I discuss the significance of another possible influence, Mary MacLane.

These are the questions that haunt Freeman's works, from her earliest short stories to her late novels, and they are powerful and provocative. At times, Freeman seems to have backed away from their implications, but they resurface with regularity over the full span of her career. While it is important to guard against the mistake of simply equating Freeman with Jane Lennox or any of her other female characters, as some readers have been tempted to do, we must assume that she created these characters in order to explore feelings and ideas that had personal meaning for her.¹⁰³ The application of biographical material to further the understanding of a writer is always a delicate task, to be undertaken with care; for a writer like Freeman, whose content is so emotionally powerful, it is both necessary and dangerous. Freeman herself made interpretations of the relationship between her life and her work even more problematic than usual by self-consciously constructing a public persona built in part upon inconsistencies and lies. She was given an opportunity to do this by Fred Lewis Pattee, the first academic critic to give Freeman serious critical attention by including her among the most important American writers in his seminal works on American literature. In conducting research for an introduction to an edition of A New England Nun and Other Stories, Pattee corresponded with Freeman in 1919, posing a series of questions about her personal and literary background, to which she responded with her own version of the truth. Pattee, a perceptive reader of her work, seems to have accepted uncritically the information she gave him, incorporating it in his own work and thereby providing misinformation about such crucial facts as the date of her birth, her early influences, her motivation for writing, even her favorite writers.¹⁰⁴ Although further biographical research has helped us sort out the truth from

¹⁰³ Even her friends often made connections between Freeman and her characters: for example, Hamlin Garland saw her as Louisa in "A New England Nun" and her close friend, Evie Sawyer, thought of her as the awkward and devoted Sally in "A Humble Romance."

¹⁰⁴ Freeman's responses to Pattee's inquiries are reprinted in The Infant Sphinx: Collected Letters of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1985), edited by Brent L. Kendrick. In addition to his introduction to A New England Nun, Pattee wrote extensively about Freeman in A History of American Literature Since 1870 (1915), Sidelights on American Literature (1915), The Development of the American Short Story (1923), and The New American Literature, 1890-1930 (1930).

what she told Pattee about herself, some residue of her self-constructed public self has persisted in current studies of her work.¹⁰⁵ Acknowledging these difficulties, some attempt to view the woman who created the fiction must be made, understanding that what we think we see is still influenced, at least in part, by what we want and expect to see.

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman was born in 1852, in Randolph, Massachusetts, a small working-class mill town, just outside of Boston, that specialized in shoe manufacture. Her parents were natives of the town and the men on both sides of the family earned their livings in the building trades, her father as a house builder and her mother's father as a housepainter. Although her mother gave birth to four children, only two survived past childhood, Mary and a younger sister, Anna. When Wilkins was fifteen, the family moved to Brattleboro, Vermont, where her father opened a dry goods store. The town of Brattleboro was a sophisticated community, well-known as a fashionable spa, where a number of artists and writers lived, and many more visited.¹⁰⁶ The Wilkins family were newcomers who held a relatively low social position in the community and who struggled financially. Their small house was located in an undesirable part of town and stood next to the Vermont Insane Asylum, the memories of which served Wilkins well when she began to write. Nevertheless, Wilkins and her sister received relatively good educations. After she graduated from

¹⁰⁵ In addition to the letters edited by Kendrick and his valuable introductions and annotations, most of our information about Freeman comes from Edward Foster, whose literary biography, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1956), was the first significant study of her life and works. Other full-length studies include Perry D. Westbrook's Acres of Flint: Writers of Rural New England, 1870-1900 (1951) and Mary Wilkins Freeman (rev. 1988), Mary R. Reichardt's A Web of Relationship: Women in the Short Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman (1992), and Critical Essays on Mary Wilkins Freeman (1991), edited by Shirley Marchalonis. Also of interest are the introductions to collections of Freeman's work, especially Marjorie Pryse's Selected Stories of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1983) and Reichardt's The Uncollected Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman (1992). During the last decade, there has been a minor explosion of Freeman scholarship; the MLA bibliography lists fifty-eight entries from 1981 to 1994.

¹⁰⁶ Among the notables who lived in Brattleboro were Royall Tyler, William Morris Hunt, Larkin Mead, and Rudyard Kipling (whose marriage to a Brattleboro woman occurred after Wilkins left but whom she met on subsequent visits), and the sister of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Anna, who hosted a salon. Among the many writers who visited Brattleboro for their health was Harriet Beecher Stowe. The town's cultural resources included numerous academies, three newspapers, four magazines, a symphony orchestra, and a major Lyceum.

Brattleboro High School in 1870, Wilkins went to study at Mount Holyoke College. Homesickness and ill health brought her back home a year later and she then took courses at the less demanding Glenwood Ladies' Seminary. After returning to Brattleboro, she formed a close friendship with Evelyn (Evie) Sawyer, a young woman her own age with whom she shared a love for literature. The friendship was an important one in her emotional and intellectual development, and lasted all her life.¹⁰⁷

Although she was not considered especially pretty, talented, or popular, Wilkins's early life appears to have been free from serious difficulties. But a series of disasters beset the family when she was in her early twenties. First, as result of the economic depression of 1873, her father's business failed, forcing him to sell his drygoods store and return to the building trade. In an effort to help out financially, Wilkins tried teaching in her friend Evie's sister's school, but she did not like it at all and had to quit after a year because of its effect on her health. Then she lost two women who were especially important to her: in 1875, Evie married and moved away, and in 1876, Wilkins's younger sister, Anna, died suddenly at the age of seventeen. Her sister's death must have been an especially severe blow. Anna seemed to have epitomized the ideal American girl and was generally considered more talented, witty, and likable than her older sister. She was well known for her musical talents--she was organist for the Congregational Church and pianist for the Brattleboro Choral Union--and, even though she was younger by seven years, she was already engaged to be married. In 1877, after Anna's death and her father's bankruptcy, Wilkins and her parents moved into the home of the Reverend Thomas Pickman Tyler, one of the leading families in town, where her mother worked as a housekeeper. This descent into service and dependency must have been humiliating for the entire family, but particularly difficult for Wilkins, now twenty-five, because of her friendship, or perhaps even romance, with the Tyler son, Hanson, an ensign in the United States Navy,

¹⁰⁷ Foster compiled the following list of authors read by Wilkins and Sawyer during this period based upon statements by Evelyn Sawyer Severance herself: Auerbach, Dickens, Emerson, Greek mythology and philosophy, Hawthorne, Jewett, Poe, Stowe, Thackeray, Taylor's translation of Faust, Thoreau, and a "lot of poetry" (33).

whom she had met in 1873.¹⁰⁸ Difficult as the years living as servants in the Tyler home must have been, the worst blow of all came in December, 1880 when Wilkins's mother died suddenly at the age of fifty-three. Having to move out of the Tyler home into far more modest quarters, Wilkins spent the next two years housekeeping for her father until he went down to Florida, seeking work and a warmer climate, and died a year later.

In 1883, Wilkins was a thirty-one-year-old unmarried woman, with no immediate family on whom to rely. She had to find a place to live and a way to earn some money. For some time she had been searching to find a means of support, trying both music and painting, in addition to teaching.¹⁰⁹ According to one of Foster's sources, Wilkins's father once said to a friend about his two daughters: "Nan . . . is a good musician and will be able to take care of herself. But Mary--she has no talent, and I don't know what she will do to make a living" (32). Later in life, Wilkins seemed reluctant to talk about her early aspirations and tended to make light of them, claiming that she took up writing because it was less expensive than either painting or music. In 1919, with her characteristic tone of self-disparagement, she described the beginning of her career to Pattee: "Pen and ink and paper involved slight capital, and were most obviously at hand. I sat down and wrote my little stories about the types I knew, they sold. That is really all. Very simple" (Kendrick 385). Her account may have had some truth in it, but it was also part of a myth she had constructed about herself, perhaps to underplay her

¹⁰⁸ The nature of this relationship has been the subject of great speculation. Her biographers, notably Foster and Westbrook, believe that Wilkins fell deeply in love with Hanson but that he did not return her feelings. They further surmise that Wilkins remained in love with him all her life, based on the information that she kept his picture displayed and that she wore his buttons on her dressing gown during the last years of her life. There is little direct evidence to indicate exactly what her feelings were. No letters to him survive and he is mentioned in only three, written in 1886 and 1887, in which she refers to him only as a friend. As Susan Koppelman suggests in "About 'Two Friends' and Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman" (1988), "The assumption behind the rumor . . . is that she must have loved some man and since there was no man in her life for so many years, it must be that the man she loved either didn't reciprocate or wasn't available" (45). As Koppelman and other recent feminist critics have suggested, American literary biography has historically shown an inordinate interest in uncovering the unrequited (male) loves of women writers who failed to marry on schedule, or at all, and to ignore the evidence of "inappropriate" love relationships, notably those with other women.

¹⁰⁹ The 1880 census lists Wilkins as a music teacher. However, she also had begun writing by this date.

struggles during a decade that must have been extremely difficult for her. To further create the false impression that she had entered writing almost casually as a young girl, she lied about her age, telling Pattee that she had been born in 1862, a decade after her real birth. Because of this erasure of ten years, early critical essays about her by Pattee and later by F. O. Matthiessen presented her more as a prodigy than a late bloomer. Her new birthdate had her publishing her first stories when she was nineteen instead of twenty-nine, and achieving critical recognition when she was twenty-five instead of thirty-five. Given the early success of other women authors at the time, this revision of history must not have seemed completely unbelievable, but it significantly distorted the nature of Wilkins's experience as a young woman and a developing writer.

Unlike her predecessors, Spofford and Phelps, Mary E. Wilkins did not burst on the literary scene at an early age and she was not immediately recognized by the New England establishment as a writer of note. Her introduction into the world of letters was slow and halting. Wilkins first appeared in print in a mediocre magazine entitled Good Times where she published eleven short works for which she received no payment between 1877 and 1880, while still living in the Tyler home. In 1881, just after her mother's death but before her father's move to Florida, she began writing for Wide Awake, a periodical for juveniles, earning ten dollars for each submission. Around the same time, her poetry began to appear in St. Nicholas, a leading children's magazine. While she was establishing a career in children's writing, she also began to write fiction and poetry for adults. In 1881, "Sweet Phyllis," a poem written in the style of Herrick, was published in Century and late the same year she won a fifty dollar prize for an adult story printed in the Boston Sunday Budget. This recognition gave her the confidence to focus on adult fiction and to set her goals higher. She sent her next adult story, "Two Old Lovers," to Lippincott's, Century, and The Atlantic, but it was rejected by all three before finally being accepted by the New York-based women's magazine, Harper's Bazar, edited by Mary Louise Booth.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ As has already been noted in the chapter on Harriet Prescott Spofford, Mary L. Booth was an important literary figure during the second half of the nineteenth century who took charge of Harper's Bazar at its inception in 1867, making her the first woman with editorial control over a periodical since Lydia Maria Child gave up her position as editor of the Anti-Slavery

Booth almost rejected the story as well, mistaking it for the work of a child because of the apparent immaturity of the author's handwriting. On reading it more carefully, however, she changed her mind, beginning a personal and professional relationship that gave Wilkins her start as a serious writer.

"Two Old Lovers" appeared in the March 1883 issue of Harper's, a month before her father's death. During the next year, Wilkins spent most of her time living with the Wheeler family in Brattleboro, with occasional visits to Evie Sawyer Severance in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts and to Mary John Wales, an old friend in Randolph. Three more stories were published in Harper's Bazar that year and Booth was so impressed that she convinced Henry Alden to accept "A Humble Romance" for the June 1884 issue of Harper's New Monthly, putting Wilkins for the first time in the company of writers such as W. D. Howells, Rose Terry Cooke, Harriet Prescott Spofford, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Sarah Orne Jewett, Edward Everett Hale, and George W. Cable (Foster 58). Also in June, after the settlement of her father's estate left her with \$969 in cash and a small rental income from property he had managed to keep, Wilkins moved from Brattleboro back to Randolph to take up residence in the Wales family home where she remained for the next nineteen years. In addition to Mary Wales and her mother, the family included her father, until his death in 1897, and her brother, who was sent out to live with the hired man when Wilkins moved in. Wilkins occupied a bedroom and parlor on the north side of the house. Mary Wales and her mother took care of cooking, housekeeping, and finances, leaving Wilkins free to concentrate on her writing.

Little is actually known about Wilkins's relationship with Mary Wales, who Foster reports was an outspoken woman with unorthodox religious views, who had "heavy" features and a "frumpish" body, whose nickname was "John," and who "liked men and never married" (61). No correspondence between them has surfaced, but from Wilkins's letters to others it appears clear that the women saw themselves and were seen by others as a couple. They took trips together to Boston to see friends and go

Standard, in 1849. In addition to Spofford's biography of Booth in Our Famous Women, Susan E. Dickinson writes about her in a chapter on "Woman in Journalism" in Woman's Work in America (1891), edited by Annie Nathan Meyer, in which she describes Booth as also having been an important historian of New York City and a translator.

shopping, and Wales accompanied Wilkins on longer trips to New York and Virginia. Wales seems to have made all the arrangements for these various trips, as she did for most aspects of their lives. Wilkins habitually ended her personal letters with greetings from Wales and during the occasional periods when they were apart, Wilkins spoke in her personal letters of being lonely and missing her. According to information given to Foster by a neighbor, Wilkins suffered all her life from nightmares and relied so much upon Wales for comfort that when she had to move downstairs in order to nurse her mother, Wilkins could not sleep and became addicted to sedatives (141). This bit of gossip about Wilkins's tendency to suffer from nightmares and her reliance upon a woman's comfort to get through the night is echoed by similar episodes in her fiction, which presents characters and themes that in other respects might be identified today as lesbian.¹¹¹

As she was establishing a stable home with Mary Wales and her family, and launching her career as a writer, Wilkins also began developing relationships with other professional women, especially women who lived together in couples. One of the most important of these was with her publisher, Mary Louise Booth. As an older and more experienced woman, Booth supported and helped to shape Wilkin's writing, through her encouragement as well as her criticism. She also served as a role model for a new kind of independent woman who chose to pursue a profession and share her life with another woman rather than marry and raise a family. Wilkins's letters to Booth provide an especially illuminating insight into her character and the nature of her relationships. Beginning in 1886, after Wilkins and Wales visited Booth and her companion, Anna W. Wright, in New York in January, the relationship began to take on a more personal tone.¹¹² From that

¹¹¹ Stories with lesbian themes are "Two Friends" (1887) and "The Long Arm" (1895), discussed later in this chapter. In addition, there are strong lesbian themes in her novels The Portion of Labor (1901), By the Light of the Soul (1906), also discussed later, and Shoulders of Atlas (1908).

¹¹² According to Spefford, Mary Booth and Anna Wright had been childhood friends who shared a home after the death of Mrs. Wright's husband, a sea captain. She writes of their relationship as "one of those lifelong and tender affections which are too intimate and delicate for public mention, but which are among the friendships of history,—a friendship that was begun in childhood and that cannot cease in death" (132).

time on, she always signed her letters to "Miss Booth" with childlike affection as "Pussy Willow." Warm greetings were always sent to Mrs. Wright and usually from Mary Wales; little domestic stories were told, especially concerning a variety of cats, dogs, and birds in both households; gossip was exchanged regarding mutual friends, many of them women living with other women; gifts were given and received; and concerns about health expressed. More visits and intimate letters followed during the next three years, until Booth died in 1889.

Wilkins's letters show that she was eager to be involved in a community of literary and artistic women, and as she gained confidence as a writer, her new literary and social life burgeoned. It is difficult to determine what role, if any, Wales played but we know she usually accompanied Wilkins on her trips to New York and we can assume she also went with her to other locations. In a letter to Booth written in 1888, Wilkins mentions planning a trip to Boston to visit Madeline Yale Wynne and Anna Cabot Putnam, two women slightly older than Wilkins who were silver and copper artisans. Mrs. Wynne, she writes, "knows all the people I want to meet, Miss Jewett, and Mrs. Fields etc." (88).¹¹³ A year after this letter, Wilkins finally met Jewett and Fields, and exchanged letters with each. Although it appears from the tone of the correspondence that she did not form a close friendship with either woman, Wilkins socialized with them on a few occasions and was invited to a number of events at 148 Charles Street, including a reception for the painter Sargeant in March 1899. In the summer of 1890, Wilkins met Charlotte Alice Baker and Susan Minot Lane, a Boston couple who ran a school together, and with whom she corresponded and visited, along with their friend, Emma Lewis Colman. Another couple with whom Wilkins became friends during the 1890's was Katharine Lee Bates, head of the Wellesley College English Department, and her companion, Katharine Conan. Bates and Conan are probably the "critical friends" at Wellesley to whom Wilkins refers in a letter to Evie Sawyer Severance in 1893, when she was writing her second novel, Pembroke. In 1894, Wilkins began a friendship

¹¹³ By the time Wilkins met them, Sara Orne Jewett and Annie Adams Fields were spending most of the year together and were at the center of a group of women writers and artists. In the same letter, Wilkins says she also would like to see Miss Prescott and Mrs. Spofford, a reference to Harriet Spofford, whose husband had just died, and her sister, with whom she now lived.

with the portrait painter Marian Boyd Allen and her brother Willis, and began attending Monday receptions at the home of their mother along with other prominent women such as Julia Ward Howe, Louise Chandler Moulton, and Lucy Larcom. Years later, Wilkins made her only European trip in the company of Marian and Willis. Wilkins's contacts went beyond the Boston area. Beginning around 1897, she wrote a number of personal and playful letters to the Iowa writer, Alice French, which include references to past and future visits. French, who wrote under the name Octavia Thanet, was one of the highest paid writers of the late nineteenth century and shared a home for nearly fifty years with her companion, Jane Crawford.

In addition to her relationships with women, Wilkins formed a number of important friendships with literary men. In 1887, shortly after the publication of A Humble Romance, she was contacted by the young writer Hamlin Garland, who was collecting material for his lectures on American literature. Wilkins and Garland became members of a group of writers, also including Louise Imogen Guiney, Gertrude and Minnie Smith, Alice Brown, Bradford Torrey, and Sylvester Baxter, who met at the home of Joseph Edgar Chamberlin, Boston columnist and editor of The Youth's Companion. In his diary, Garland provided the following portrait of Wilkins at these literary events:

She was at that time a small, shy, yellow-haired, blue-eyed girl just reaching the old-maid stage of life. She was reticent, low-voiced, plain of dress--a kind of brown thrush of a woman, one who fitted into a company so quietly that few noticed her. . . . Often at our meetings around Chamberlin's open fire Mary would respond to calls for a story by telling a ghost story or a mystery story, and she told them well, in concise, vivid diction, and sitting quietly in her chair with two or three of her girl friends grouped about her feet. She was like her stories, plain, simple, humorous. She made no claims as a writer, although her work was meeting with the widest acceptance. (127-8)

Garland also recorded in his diary a trip he took to visit Wilkins in Randolph in which he gives his perception of her relationship with Wales:

Her housekeeper was also her companion, almost her jailer and task-master, for Mary laughingly described to me how relentless her housekeeper was. "She shuts me in my study each morning and won't let me out till I have written at least fifteen hundred words." . . . Our supper that June evening was very New England. Several kinds of cakes, berries and cream, and hot biscuits. Mary was almost as much a guest as myself. Her resolute companion and housekeeper was in full charge and sat with us to see that we ate of each cake and that our cups were replenished. (128)¹¹⁴

Wilkins formed lasting and intimate friendships with both Garland and Chamberlin. Garland included Wilkins's work in his lectures and writings about American realism, and his questions regarding her artistic intentions may well have helped her to clarify her own approach to narrative fiction. It is also likely that she had an influence on his Main-Travelled Roads, published in 1891. Chamberlin also played an important role in Wilkins's development as a writer. As a literary commentator who followed the most advanced writing of the period, he introduced her to other writers in the Boston area and involved her in discussions of new ideas and literary trends. He was also her collaborator in the writing of one of her most popular works, "The Long Arm," which won a two thousand dollar prize for its authors in 1895 and about which I have more to say later in this chapter. In a letter to her editor about the story, Wilkins wrote that Chamberlin and his wife "are great friends of mine, and I am in the habit of consulting them a deal, about my work" (Kendrick 171). In recognition of the closeness of their

¹¹⁴ It is difficult to guess exactly what Garland meant when he used the term "housekeeper" in reference to Wales. It might have been no more than an acknowledgement that it was Wales who took care of the details of running the household, just as a good wife would have if Wilkins had been a man. It might have reflected caution on the part of Wilkins in representing the nature of her relationship to a new friend, especially a young man who may not have been understanding. Or, it might have been his own misunderstanding of the relationship, which might explain his surprise when Wales joined them at the table for supper. There is no other indication, especially in any of Wilkins's own references to Wales, that she was regarded as holding an inferior status as a servant. In fact, in her letters, Wilkins always referred to Mary Wales as "my friend." In another account of this trip, written at a much later date, Garland referred to Wales simply as Wilkins's companion, but this term is similarly ambiguous.

personal relationship, Chamberlin and his wife named their only daughter Mary Eleanor after her.

All in all, what we know about Wilkins's life during the 1880's and 1890's suggests an active woman developing into a professional writer, who made her home with a woman companion, and who joined socially in an artistic and literary community that included many other women in similar circumstances. This view is almost completely at variance with the image that has been created by critics and biographers of a neurotic spinster who wrote, in relative isolation, stories about other neurotic spinsters. Wilkins may have been writing about a New England in decay but she was part of a literary and social world that was very much alive.

Wilkins lived with Mary Wales for eighteen years, from 1884, when she was thirty-two, until 1902, when she was fifty. During these years, she wrote most of the works for which she is best known and became a successful author, both in terms of financial remuneration and critical reputation. From 1883 to 1887, Wilkins published enough stories in the Harper's magazines (Harper's Bazar and Harper's Monthly) to warrant a book-length collection which came out in 1887 as A Humble Romance and Other Stories. Four years later, a second volume of stories was published titled A New England Nun and Other Stories, which includes most of the short stories for which she is best known today. These two collections were enough to establish Wilkins's reputation as one of the foremost practitioners of realistic fiction. Not only had she become one of the most highly regarded writers in America, but she was being read in England and on the Continent.¹¹⁵ In 1890, The Critic noted that "There is something like a craze in England over Mary E. Wilkins" and in 1891 her English publisher wrote to inform her that "Mr. Henry James, a dear friend of mine, has lately been taken with an enormous enthusiasm for your stories" (Foster 89). During the 1890's, Wilkins continued to write short fiction and poetry, including four volumes of juvenile fiction, while also extending her literary scope to plays and novels, believing that only with these more weighty forms would she be taken seriously as a writer of

¹¹⁵ According to Pattee, in New American Literature (1930), Wilkins's fame in her native country came only after she was praised by the English as being "a new significant note in fictional realism" (240).

importance. The higher price paid for serialized fiction also may have been an incentive. By the close of 1901, she had written three plays and eight novels, including Pembroke (1894) and A Portion of Labor (1901), and she had become a financially successful writer whose work was widely read and admired.

In 1902, after nineteen years of stability with Mary Wales, Wilkins changed her life radically by marrying Dr. Charles Manning Freeman, a man seven years younger than she with a reputation for leading a dissolute life. Dr. Freeman had been trained as a physician but was fired from his first job as Medical Examiner for the Bureau of Pensions in Washington D.C. and left medicine to join the family business in lumber and coal, based in Metuchen, New Jersey, just outside of New York City. Foster cites Wilkins's friend, Kate Upson Clarke, who introduced the couple in 1893, as saying that Dr. Freeman was a man who "refused to grow up: he drank too much, drove fast horses, courted all the girls, skillfully eluded marriage" (113). Wilkins and Freeman apparently became engaged four years after they met, but she was so ambivalent that the wedding was scheduled and put off a number of times during the next five years. Because she was by then a well-known figure, the vagaries of her private life became a hot topic for the newspapers. The reporters, assuming that she was the reluctant party, eventually became irritated with her. The New York Evening Sun accused her of being "a modern bluestocking" who used her engagements as a way of getting publicity to increase sales. The New York Telegraph wrote "the public is really tired of the love affairs of the literary old maid, and the sooner she marries the doctor and takes him out of the public view the more highly will the action be appreciated." And the New Brunswick Home News ran the headline "Please, Miss Wilkins, Marry Dr. Freeman" in an attempt to move things along (Kendrick 207). Finally, just after Christmas, Wilkins, accompanied as always by Mary Wales, left her home in Randolph and travelled incognito to Metuchen, New Jersey where she quietly married Dr. Freeman on New Year's Day, 1902. She was fifty, he was forty-three.

The marriage seems to have begun reasonably well, if Mary Wilkins Freeman's letters are to be believed, and the first decade seems to have been relatively stable. Due to her commercial success as a writer and her husband's family business, the couple enjoyed a high level of affluence. With the profits

of one of her novels, a house was built and richly furnished, and at one point, they owned six automobiles.¹¹⁶ Although later accounts indicate that Dr. Freeman was drunk almost constantly for most of his life, no mention of this or any other kind of marital trouble is made in Freeman's letters until his health reached a critical point years later. It may be that whatever was missing in her married life was made up by her friendships and her work. Living now in Metuchen, Freeman developed relationships that were especially close with Carolyn, Harriet, and Annie Alden, the three unmarried daughters of her publisher, and with various female members of her husband's family. She also maintained close relationships with the friends of her former life. She and Mary Wales frequently visited each other, and Freeman maintained a room in the Wales home for many years and continued to provide financial support to the family, until Wales died in 1916, after undergoing surgery for breast cancer the year before.

Although Dr. Freeman was hospitalized for alcohol abuse a number of times dating from at least 1909, his condition began to seriously deteriorate in 1918, when he began using narcotics in addition to alcohol and became frighteningly abusive, causing Freeman to be worried about her safety.¹¹⁷ Moreover, his binges became impossible to hide from others when he began to disappear for days at a time. In 1920, Dr. Freeman was hospitalized for alcohol and drug addiction, but he escaped and had to be committed by his wife into the Trenton Insane Asylum. When he was again released in 1921, Freeman obtained a legal separation in order to protect herself. Dr. Freeman then took up residence with his chauffeur and his wife, until his death in 1923 when he left the bulk of his estate to them. Because Freeman and her husband were figures of considerable social and cultural standing, their personal difficulties occurred in a public spotlight and the publicity must have been extremely difficult. In a final public humiliation, Freeman was forced to contest her deceased husband's will in a long and sensationalist trial. Although she eventually won, the estate was never fully settled. Freeman

¹¹⁶ The novel was The Shoulders of Atlas for which Freeman received a total of around \$20,000.

¹¹⁷ Foster reports that Dr. Freeman spent some time in a New York sanatorium in 1909 because of his drinking problems, but that "the marriage survived this testing" (181).

makes little mention of her husband's drinking problems in her letters. An exception is one written to a friend four years after his death in which she attributes his problems to the Volsted Act and clarifies the nature of their final relationship: "He would have partaken of the ardent in any case, but would not have gone blind or insane. Of course it was not altogether hilarious for the poor man or me. I was forced to obtain a separation, not a divorce, a separation for protection" (Kendrick 412).

Freeman lived with her husband for nineteen years before their formal separation, including the final period when he was in and out of institutions. During this time, she continued to publish short stories in both periodicals and in collected volumes, being paid as much as one thousand dollars per story. She also wrote seven novels including By the Light of the Soul (1906) and The Shoulders of Atlas (1908). In addition, she contributed a chapter to a composite novel conceived by William Dean Howells, The Whole Family: A Novel by Twelve Authors (1906), which she nearly derailed by writing the character of a maiden aunt in an untraditional manner.¹¹⁸ In America, she had become a household name and in England she was ranked first among the American realists (Foster 178). She was considered such an important writer in 1905 that at Mark Twain's seventieth birthday party held at Delmonico's in New York with two hundred guests, she was the person seated at his right side. In 1917, she was one of three women--the others were Margaret Deland and Edith Wharton--nominated for membership to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. None were elected at the time, because the members were divided about whether to admit women, but all three were finally elected nearly ten years later, in 1926, along with a fourth, Agnes

¹¹⁸ Howells's plan was to bring together twelve leading writers who would write a chapter each focusing on a different member of the family. Howells took for himself the character of the father and Freeman was given "the old-maid aunt." Other writers included Henry James (the married son) and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (the married daughter). Mark Twain was invited to take the part of the small boy but turned down the offer. In his first chapter, Howells began to lay out the plot and the characters in a completely conventional way. This irritated Freeman who had been given the second chapter. Instead of continuing to develop the stereotypical spinster introduced by Howells and expected by everyone else, Freeman created a thoroughly modern unmarried woman who was both sexy and attractive. Then Freeman threw a wrench into the traditional marriage plot by revealing that the young man who was the fiance of the family's daughter was secretly in love with "the old maid aunt," forcing the writers of subsequent chapters to grapple with a nontraditional story, whether they wanted to or not.

Repplier. In 1925, the American Academy of Arts and Letters awarded Freeman the first William Dean Howells Medal for distinguished work in fiction, presented by her longtime friend, admirer, and fellow writer, Hamlin Garland. A reminder of her former status is inscribed on the bronze doors of the academy: "Dedicated to the Memory of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and the Women Writers of America."

The facts and myths of Mary Wilkins Freeman's life defy attempts to categorize her. As I previously noted, she herself contributed to what appear to be a series of contradictions by consciously or unconsciously constructing a myth about her past. A sense of her personal confusion and self-doubt comes through in the following excerpt from the cover letter to Pattee she wrote in 1919 with her answers to his questions:

Dear Prof. Pattee

On another page I answer your questions as best I am able. It is as difficult for me to reply truthfully to some, as if they did not concern me at all. If I have attempted self-analysis, and of course I must have occasionally, like most people, I have met problems, half remembered powers, half remembered achiev[e]ments, which might not be even real, but just mythical for we all can invent myths, if they are myths, that I have given up. (Kendrick 383)

It is, then, sometimes difficult to sort out the "truths" from the "myths." Despite her financial independence and critical stature, achieved during a time when the "New Woman" was emerging as a cultural image countering the restrictive stereotypes that had defined an earlier generation's conception of true womanhood, she cultivated an image of herself as childlike and feminine. I have already noted that when she was close to thirty years old, she had the handwriting of a child and signed her letters to Booth, who was after all her publisher as well as her friend, as "Your Pussy Willow."¹¹⁹ Other intimates knew her by her diminutive nickname "Dolly."

¹¹⁹ Sarah Orne Jewett used a similar kind of baby talk in her early letters to Annie Fields, suggesting that there may have been some kind of cultural permission for the younger woman in

Her lies about her age, noted earlier, are consistent with the creation of an affect that was disingenuously innocent and childlike. In keeping with what seems to have been a conscious projection of a stereotypical female image, Freeman made much of her fear of horses and expressed a feminine concern about keeping up with the latest styles in clothes and hats. Yet she told her friend, Evie Sawyer, about the "thrilling experience" of dressing up one night in men's clothing and gazing at her image in the mirror (Foster 42). After her marriage, which was itself a puzzling contradiction, perhaps motivated in part by a need to be seen as feminine, she continued to cultivate her public image by decorating her home in white furniture, with even a white piano, and referring to it as her miniature dollhouse. Although she achieved financial independence through her writing, she appears to have been so emotionally dependent throughout her life on the care of other women that, even after she left Mary Wales, she was always accompanied by a live-in maid or relative, one of whom, during the latter part of her life, used to call her "Miss Baby." Freeman's self-constructed image extended to her origins and motivations as a writer. She encouraged her readers and critics to see her as unschooled, a gem in the raw, who had practically no knowledge of other writers, either those who came before her or her contemporaries. In answer to Pattee's question about the writers who influenced her style, she wrote "it may seem egotistical but there were none. I did, however, strange it may seem, stand entirely alone. As a matter of fact, I would read nothing which I thought might influence me" (Kendrick 382). Pattee consequently reported in The New American Literature (1930) that "of English or French or Russian realism she knew nothing, read nothing" (240). Yet, other sources, including her own letters, show that since her school days she had been reading and praising the work of other writers with similar sensibilities, including Hawthorne, Jewett, the Brontes (especially Emily), Hardy, and Dostoevski.¹²⁰

a female relationship to infantilize herself in relation to the older woman, in imitation of the mother-daughter relationship.

¹²⁰ Of Crime and Punishment, Wilkins wrote to Chamberlin "This book seems to me like one of my own nightmares" (Foster 134). In a 1901 essay on Bronte, Wilkins uses language not unlike that Pattee used to describe her: "Wuthering Heights is almost inconceivable, taken as the work of a woman . . . How she ever came to comprehend the primitive brutalities and passions, and the great truth of life which sanctifies them, is a mystery. . . . How this girl knew the truths, the savage but undeniable truths which she had never been taught, the strength of the passions which she had never known and which she would doubtless have held as a shame to

Given the misinformation he was given and his willingness to believe it, we can understand the paternalistic amazement Pattee expressed in his 1920 introduction to A New England Nun: "How did this girl of twenty-five know of all this human tragedy, all of these grim and desolate lives, all of these curious abnormalities of soul?" (xxii). Though his facts were wrong, his question characterizes the prevalent view of Freeman's work during her lifetime and up to the present time as fundamentally dark and tragic. Her friend, the poet and essayist, Louise Imogen Guiney, called her "a sort of sordid Aeschylus" (Brooks 464). Another contemporary, Julia R. Tutweiler, compared her with Sarah Orne Jewett, in a 1903 essay in which she argued that while "Jewett's inspiration is Greek in its love of beauty, its serene optimism, and its copious simplicity . . . Mary E. Wilkins' art is essentially Gothic in the sombre rigidity of its moral ideals" (Marchalonis 90). In 1905, the influential critic and teacher, Paul Elmer More, linked Cotton Mather, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Mary Wilkins Freeman as the most important practitioners of an American tradition of Puritanism (Westbrook 135). In addition to characterizing her work as darkly tragic, critics have emphasized Freeman's concern with emotional abnormalities, notably those caused by the effects of deprivation and repression. As one of the first academics to write extensively about Freeman during her lifetime, Pattee set the path for future interpretations of her work by stating in his 1920 introduction that her territory encompassed "abnormalities of conscience, freedom of will become narrow wilfulness, unswerving allegiance to an idea degenerated into balkiness" (xi). An English critic, Arthur Machen, wrote in 1923 that Wilkins has produced "real literature" because of her own "loneliness of soul." He goes on to write: "She has painted a society in which each man stands apart, responsible only for himself and to himself, conscious only of his soul and his God" (Foster 104). F.O. Matthiessen wrote in 1931 of Freeman's "distorted old maids, and awkward girls over whose starved emotions already hung the shadow of a kindred distortion" (Marchalonis 95). Like Tutweiler, Matthiessen compared her with Jewett, concluding that "Wilkins possesses what few of her contemporaries seem to have been able to understand, a

her maiden soul, is the question" (Marchalonis 68-9). When Wilkins wrote these words, she was herself a forty-nine-year-old unmarried woman who most men would assume to be just as naive about sexual passions as she assumed Bronte to have been.

deeply rooted feeling that life was a tragedy" (Marchalonis 101). These early critics set the context in which Freeman has been almost consistently read by attributing the sense of tragedy in her work to a loneliness and social isolation resulting in part from her own and her characters' unmarried status.

Freeman's critics and biographers, male and female, have tended to connect their ideas about the effects of sexual repression on the emotional lives of her characters to their assumptions about her own state of mind as a woman who was unmarried for much of her life. Linking Freeman with Jane Lennox, the narrator of the unfinished fragment quoted earlier in this chapter, Foster asks: "Was Miss Wilkins indeed a 'monster'? Of course not. She was simply a troubled woman, prone on occasion to looking hard at herself, much harder than is customary among most troubled women" (143). Making a more explicit connection between what he understood to be sexual repression and pathology, Perry D. Westbrook saw Freeman as a writer who specialized "in the almost pathological manifestations of the overdeveloped will deprived of a worthwhile channel for its powers" (3). According to Westbrook, Freeman's most common theme results from her personal situation and her historical veracity. Praising her as "our most truthful recorder in fiction of New England village life" (1), he sees her stories about single women as largely "a reflection of real-life conditions," notably the Civil War and the westward migration which decreased the number of men available for marriage, and concludes that "Freeman's young women and girls have one main goal in life as a general rule--to find a husband in a scarce market" (32). He assumes this was her goal as well. The failure to find worthwhile channels for powerful wills is, according to him, the result of social circumstances that made marriage impossible for many women.

The prevailing view that Freeman created a set of characters, mostly female, whose lives are defined as being "grim and desolate" is one that is not limited to a male critical perspective. Ann Douglas Wood, in her influential essay on women writers of the so-called local color movement, "The Literature of Impoverishment: The Women Local Colorists in America 1865-1914" (1972) focuses attention on Freeman as one of the women writers who "actually valued . . . the conventional feminine virtues, but . . . lost faith in their potency." Wood characterizes the Jane Lennox fragment as "almost like

a witch's confession" and suggests that Freeman must have seen this witchlike power as her own. Her view that Freeman's work unconsciously reflects the cultural impoverishment of the local color writers seems to prohibit any interpretation that does not characterize her as either mad or pathetic. Josephine Donovan, in New England Local Color Literature (1988), takes a more positive view of other local color writers, but she places Freeman as the recorder of the final defeat of women and women's values that she believes occurred at the end of the nineteenth century. As Donovan sees it:

Something is dying in the fictional world of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. A way of life--the woman-centered, matriarchal world of the Victorian--is in its last throes. The preindustrial values of that world, female-identified and ecologically holistic, are going down to defeat before the imperialism of masculine technology and patriarchal institutions. (119)

More recent feminist readings have turned from this essentially pessimistic view to a very different view of Freeman as a champion of the rebellious woman. Mary R. Reichardt, in her introduction to Freeman's Uncollected Stories (1992), expresses this more positive view when she writes that Freeman's "most compelling and characteristic theme [is] women's struggles for self-assertion and self-identity in often repressive and impoverished circumstances" and that she is "best known for her superb portraits of women who attempt to rebel against the norms of a patriarchal society and the strictures of conservative religion" (ix). In a similar vein, Marjorie Pryse in an introduction to Selected Stories (1983) considers Freeman's most characteristic works to be about the "revolt of mother," as compared with Jewett whose theme is the "reunion with mother." While Pryse agrees with earlier critics that both writers took as their theme the lives of deviant women, she recognizes that the theme itself does not lead inevitably to defeat. On the contrary, she writes that Freeman "emphasizes the presence of marked or stigmatized characters as receivers and creators of vision. . . . [and that] most of them achieve their vision and find consolation for their social stigma in the affections of other women and in their choice to lead independent lives" (x-xi). A similar but a more negative reading comes

from Emily Toth in "'The Rarest and Most Peculiar Grape': Versions of the New England Woman in Nineteenth-Century Local Color Literature" (1985), who writes that "Mary E. Wilkins Freeman specialized in portraits of neurotic single women" (18) and goes on to comment, somewhat homophobically, that "in the absence of men, love between women can become uncomfortably excessive in some of Freeman's stories" (20).

As the above summary suggests, critics have tended to draw opposite conclusions regarding the nature of Freeman's intentions and meanings, depending upon their gender and their politics. Freeman herself undoubtedly contributed to this wide range of interpretations by providing us with conflicting information about herself which allows the reader to select which "facts" best suit his or her theories. Elizabeth Meese, in "Signs of Undecidability: Reconsidering the Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman" (1986), negotiates a path through these contradictory readings by arguing that Freeman's meaning and tone cannot be as readily fixed as either critical camp would like. Opposing those who have "fixed Freeman's place as one of New England's large cast of 'striving neurotics,'" Meese proposes that Freeman's "own experience of sexual politics led her to represent the interplay of forces through undecidable or purposefully 'unreadable' images that both affirm and negate, sometimes alternately and at other times simultaneously, but always resisting a determination of the text's meanings." She goes on to recognize in Freeman a "persistent refusal to inscribe within her fiction the simple or singular judgment of her female characters that her role as a writer within her sociohistorical context might have dictated and that later critics seem to want" (Marchalonis 158). Building upon Meese's concept of "signs of undecidability" in the analyses that follow, I show how Freeman uses the figure of deformity as an ambiguous sign capable of carrying the full range of her meaning.

I begin with "Sister Liddy" and "Christmas Jenny," two early stories collected in A New England Nun (1891).¹²¹ Both feature a single elderly

¹²¹ Although these two stories are not Freeman's best known—those would probably be "A New England Nun" and "The Revolt of Mother"—they are typical of her concerns and her characters, and have received critical attention as central texts. Analyses of "Christmas Jenny" appear in essays by Sarah W. Sherman and Martha Satz, while Wood places "Sister Liddy" at

woman who lives physically and emotionally on the outskirts of the dominant social community, and both provide a response or challenge to the apparent imperatives of the heterosexual norm.

"Sister Liddy" is, in many ways, a prototype for much of Mary Wilkins Freeman's work. The story is about the residents of a village almshouse and insane asylum--a representative collection of women who, for a variety of reasons, are unable to survive in society. The secondary characters include three old widows, one stout, one tall, one pretty, who have been left with no property and no means of support after the deaths of their husbands; a single elderly woman, described as "tall and dark and gaunt . . . like a scraggy old pine," who had once been wealthy until she "lost all her property through an injudicious male relative" (90); a pretty but sickly young woman, who had been overworked on a farm and has come to the almshouse to rest and recover, and who once had had a (male) lover whom she has not seen since she left the farm and for whom she waits passively and, we suspect, hopelessly; and Sally, a small, dimwitted woman with soft white hair who looks like "a horrible caricature" of a child, runs around half-dressed, and obsessively tears her bed to pieces.¹²² Only two other secondary characters are named, the matron, Mrs. Arms, and a little boy named Tommy. The main character, Polly Moss, is the most pitiful resident of all. Polly is old, poor, and severely deformed: "She had a twisting limp, and was so bent that she was not much taller than Tommy, her little pale triangular face seemed to look from the middle of her flat chest" (84). A pathetic rather than tragic figure, Polly never had anything to lose in her singularly uneventful life. She has ended up in the poorhouse simply because "[s]he had been always deformed and poor and friendless. She had worked for scanty pay as long as she was able, and had then drifted and struck on the almshouse where she had grown old" (92). Being childlike herself, Polly's main activity is to play with the children of the indigent poor, especially the irrepressible young Tommy. The

the center of her essay, "The Literature of Impoverishment." In New England Local Color Literature, Donovan places both among Freeman's best works.

¹²² The inclusion of these details suggests that Wilkins was familiar with the specifics of insanity, especially female hysteria, giving her ways to depict madness that were not available to other writers, such as Harriet Spofford. This familiarity can be attributed to her residence next to an insane asylum in Brattleboro and to the medical literature on insanity that became more available to the lay reader during the 1880's and 1890's.

other women make fun of her because of her appearance, describing her as "'the wust-lookin' objeck . . . more like an old cat that's had to airn it's own livin' than a human bein'" (84).

One day the inmates begin to brag about the possessions they once had owned before coming to the almshouse. Even the pathetic young farm girl and the insane Sally manage to come up with the memory of some dress or hat or piece of china that had once signified a better life. Only Polly has had nothing. Day after day, the competition goes on. Finally, in an effort to become part of the conversation, Polly speaks about her deceased sister Liddy, who once had had all the things the others had possessed and more. As Polly is the ultimate misfit, her sister Liddy was everything an American girl should be--pretty as a picture from a magazine, with long yellow curls, pink cheeks, big blue eyes, and a little red mouth. Not only was she beautiful, she was exceptionally talented and always dressed in the best of clothes. Most importantly, she was married and her husband was all a man should be--darkly handsome, rich, devoted, polite, and providing her with a comfortable home, servants, and "the beautifulest baby you ever see." Every day, the story becomes more and more elaborate until, in the end, Polly contracts a sudden bout of pneumonia and feels compelled to admit before she dies that the whole story was made up--that there never was a sister at all. The moment at the death bed would appear to be a complete rejection of the sentimental romance--an acknowledgement that the story of the perfect woman and her perfect family is nothing but a fiction. But just as Polly is about to admit her guilt, the young sickly farmgirl bursts into the sickroom to let everyone know that her Charley has come to marry her, take her home, and nurse her until she gets well. The dream of heterosexual happiness remains alive, at least for some, and even though Polly gets the final line in the story--"I never had any sister Liddy"--, the bleakness of her own history is undercut by the hopes of the farmgirl.

"Christmas Jenny" also focuses on the life of an eccentric single woman. The story opens, however, with a semi-comic, elderly married couple, Jonas and Betsey Carey. Old Jonas, as he is called, is tall and gaunt, somewhat stiff and lame from rheumatism, with one side of his body seeming to slant toward the other. By temperament, he is stubborn and

cranky, given over to what his wife calls "tantrums." Whenever he is frustrated by adverse circumstances and his own ineptitude, which is nearly all the time, he simply sits down and refuses to move--an act that Wilkins may have intended to represent the willful recalcitrance of late nineteenth-century American white men in the face of social change they could not control. As a "good wife," Betsey Carey is patient and conciliatory in her constant attempts to either prevent or coax her husband out of his tantrums, but she is generally not successful. The more she coddles him, the more stubborn he becomes. On the particular morning when the story opens, Jonah has tried three times to bring in the water from the well but each time he has slipped on the ice and emptied the water from the bucket. The last time he falls, he refuses to either speak or get up. As he sits and Betsey pleads with him, Christmas Jenny comes down the road, looking like "a broad green moving bush" (163). Jenny Wrayne is an unmarried woman who lives up on the mountainside outside the town borders, supporting herself by selling evergreen trees and wreaths each Christmas season, and vegetables in the summer. Jenny has a close connection with nature, so that she looks like one of her own trees: "she made one think of those sylvan faces with features composed of bark-wrinkles and knot-holes, that one can fancy looking out of the trunks of trees" (164). Although she is associated with the natural world of the forest rather than the social and political world of the village, Jenny is able to cross from one to the other in order to make a living.¹²³ Some people in the town think she is "love-cracked" because of "an unfortunate love affair, that was supposed to have tinctured her whole life with an alien element" (167). But if this is the case, she has come out the better for it. Sizing up the situation at the Carey household and demonstrating her superior

¹²³ "Christmas Jenny," is chronologically and thematically connected to Sarah Orne Jewett's Mrs. Bonny in *Deephaven* (1877) and her Elvira Todd in *Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896). Although Freeman told Pattee late in her life that she had not read Jewett's stories as a young writer, the account given by her friend Evelyn Sawyer Severance shows that she had, and her own letters show that she admired her, actively sought an opportunity to meet her, and corresponded with her during the period immediately preceding the publication of "Christmas Jenny" and through the 1890's. Mrs. Bonny, Mrs. Todd, and Christmas Jenny all belong to a literary tradition of eccentric women who are independent of husbands as well as the greater world of men, and who are closely attuned to nature, seeming almost to merge with the woods in which they spend most of their time, and finding their closest kindred spirits in the birds and small animals they nurture. One of the main differences between them is that Christmas Jenny had never married while Jewett describes her characters as widowed.

abilities, Jenny fetches the water to the house without a slip and then helps her friend, Betsey, to get Jonah into the house. She accomplishes this feat by getting Betsey to begin cooking the sausage since "'he knows there ain't but two cakes, an' he'll be afeard you'll give me one of 'em'" (165). This imagined threat of two women sharing all the warmth and food inside the house, with its hint of sexual as well as domestic pleasures, while the self-excluded man sits stubbornly in the cold, succeeds in getting Jonah literally off his behind, and after teasing him some more, Jenny goes on her way to sell her wreaths.

Despite their humorous appearance, Jonah Carey and his wife present a seriously negative image of a married couple. To generalize this condemnation of marriage beyond the old comic couple, Wilkins introduces a young romantic couple as well. As Jenny makes her way back to her own hut after selling her wares, she glances down at the village below where the minister's young daughter and the young man to whom she has just become betrothed are walking down the street. Appearing only twice in the story, the only function of this couple is to depict a young woman and man on the brink of marriage, and they are portrayed in language that emphasizes their conventionality.¹²⁴ Newly engaged and still shy about appearing in public, the girl has "pink cheeks" and does all the talking, while the young man who walks by her side, pays very little attention to what she says, and holds himself "very stiff and straight." It is not difficult to imagine that they are just what Jonah and Betsey might once have been and that they in turn eventually will become like the old couple. In the course of gossiping to her young man, the minister's daughter tells him of the tales going around about Christmas Jenny: "'They say she's got a lot of birds and rabbits and things shut up in cages, and half starves them; and then that little deaf-and-dumb boy, you know--they say she treats him dreadfully'" (168). She tells her young man that her father and the deacon, representatives of the conventional values of the community, are going up the next day to visit Jenny's house and look for signs of abuse.

¹²⁴ In this they resemble the young couple, Jenny Balls and Sam Polston, who appear at the end of Davis's Margret Howth to set off the singleness of Lois Yare.

The next day, the minister and deacon go up the mountain to Jenny's home, described as little more than a hut. Not finding her in, they enter uninvited, and find only the small deaf and dumb boy who is "dressed like a girl, in a long blue gingham pinafore," busily making wreaths. All around the room, little cages and hutches hold an assorted collection of injured birds and small animals which Jenny has rescued from the woods. As they search the room for incriminating evidence, Betsey Carey bursts in to scold them for spying on her friend. In her one act of rebellion, this normally conventional woman, "stood before them like a ruffled and defiant bird that was frightening herself as well as them with her temerity. She palpitated all over, but there was a fierce look in her dim blue eyes" (171). Inspired by loyalty to her friend, Betsey finds the courage to defy the male hierarchy and defend Jenny's way of life, explaining that "'if she did git kind of twisted out of the reg'lar road of lovin', she's in another one, that's full of little dumbies an' starvin' chippies an' lame rabbits, an' she ain't love-cracked no more'n other folks'" (173). As the men retreat back down the mountain, the narrator comments directly and forcefully on the fear these men have of women who refuse to conform:

They were thankful to leave that small, vociferous old woman, who seemed to be pulling herself up by her enthusiasm until she reached the air over their heads, and became so abnormal that she was frightful. Indeed, everything out of the broad, common track was a horror to these men and to many of their village fellows. Strange shadows, that their eyes could not pierce, lay upon such, and they were suspicious. The popular sentiment against Jenny Wrayne was originally the outcome of this characteristic, which was a remnant of the old New England witchcraft superstition. More than anything else, Jenny's eccentricity, her possibly uncanny deviation from the ordinary ways of life, had brought this inquiry upon her. (173-74)

The rest of the story is apparently conventional. Now contrite, the deacon sends Christmas gifts to Jenny, including the makings for a full dinner, which she shares with Betsey and Jonah, who is still having his tantrums. In the last paragraph, the minister's daughter looks up and sees Christmas Jenny's candle up on the dark side of the mountain, looking like a

star, as she walks with her betrothed to church on Christmas evening. Instead of being seen as a rebel and a threat to society, Christmas Jenny becomes associated with Christ and salvation.

In both "Sister Liddy" and "Christmas Jenny," Wilkins juxtaposes an eccentric single woman with men and women in conventional heterosexual marriages. With its Christmas theme and its happy ending, "Christmas Jenny" is the easier story to read as a positive statement about the life of its protagonist. From the moment she makes her first appearance in the story, it is clear that Jenny is a part of nature, more in tune with its realities than with the artificial rules and norms of village society. As a woman living without a man, she is strong and independent yet, in her matter of fact way, nurturing. The single male figure in her world is the deaf and dumb boy, Willy, whose cross-dressing in gingham pinafores underscores her own disregard for artificial signifiers of gender. If breaking into the house is a symbol for sexual violation, as some critics have suggested, it also can be interpreted as an invasion into the inverted nature of Christmas Jenny and, perhaps, of the author herself, for surely the androgynous Willy, a male child dressed as a girl, serves as a representation of the inner self. Except when she is threatened by the rigidity of the powerful men in the village, a threat she is never aware of, Jenny is able not only to insure her own survival but to care for deformed children and animals who are unable to care for themselves because they have been damaged by the difficult conditions of a hostile world. Impatient with the foolishness of adult men like Jonah, who have deformed themselves by their own willfulness and pride, she rejects a gendered social structure which presumes the superiority of men and demands that women cater to the supposedly stronger sex. Living high on the mountain, on the outskirts of the village, she leads her own life, outside the boundaries of society and free from its rules, only entering the village on her own terms to sell her goods. Through her independence, Jenny represents a challenge to rigid gender roles and heterosexuality as a way of life.

"Sister Liddy" presents a less definite conclusion. Earlier critics who have commented on the story have tended to circumscribe its meaning by reading it as an illustration of a single theme. Wood uses "Sister Liddy," which she considers "one of the most powerful stories written in America,"

as a central text to demonstrate her argument that women local colorists created a literature of impoverishment.¹²⁵ In a reading related to Wood's, Donovan places Freeman as the recorder of the final defeat of women and women's values that she believes took place at the end of the nineteenth century, arguing that the fabrication of the imaginary Sister Liddy is "another and powerful expression of the process of 'the fall' that was happening in women's culture" (126). Reichardt, in A Web of Relationship: Women in the Short Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman (1992), takes a more biographical approach, relating Polly's invention of an idealized sister to Wilkins's memory of her own younger sister, Anna, whose early life seemed to have held the promise of success within the conventions of true womanhood before death erased all potential (114). Wilkins may well have had herself and her sister in mind when she invented the characters in "Sister Liddy." I would note in support of a partially autobiographical reading of the story the similarity of the name Polly to Wilkins's own pet name, Dolly. The key interpretative question, however, is not whether the story is autobiographical but what it means to say about the lives of its characters.

A close reading of "Sister Liddy" suggests that Wilkins intentionally left her meaning unresolved, for there is in Polly an element of the heroic survivor as well as of the downtrodden victim. Despite her poverty and deformity, Polly is not merely a pathetic character. Like the oak leaves that she observes in the opening lines of the story, Polly has survived after the others have fallen, even if it is only to hang half lifeless in the cold rain. Like the moss from which her name is taken, she is a part of nature that is humble but enduring. Like Christmas Jenny, the most important signs that Polly's life amounts to more than deprivation and misery are her connection with nature and her friendship with the young and playful boy, Tommy, who serves as a representation of her inner self, much as the deaf and dumb boy had in "Christmas Jenny." But Polly seems to lack the independence and the strength to defy society's rules and standards that characterize Jenny. Her problem is not so much that she is a misfit but that she tries to conform to

¹²⁵ Wood's assessment of "Sister Liddy" is puzzling given her interpretation, unless she is somehow locating power within impoverishment, and is hyperbolic no matter how the story is read.

society by inventing a life that can be measured by the possession of things. By succumbing to the desire to belong to the group by joining the petty materialistic competition of the other women, she becomes, in her own words, "dretful wicked" (98). The figure of Sister Liddy reflects a fantasy of the ideal woman invented by a deformed victim of patriarchy in her futile and misguided attempt to conform to impossible standards. On the other hand, for all the misguidedness of her efforts to invent a conventional life for herself, Polly does have the ability to use her imagination and her talents as a story-teller to gain social acceptance and a measure of happiness before she dies. We might even see her as an exaggerated figure for the woman magazine writer whose works offered a conventional version of an imagined American life that seemed to be oblivious to the poverty that characterized the real lives of many of their readers.

In the works of other women writers included in this study, deformed figures are, for the most part, minor characters who function in the margins of the text to reveal essential truths about heroines who appear to be more normal. These figures often are found in the author's earliest work, only to disappear as she becomes better established as a writer. This is not the case when we look at the work of Mary Wilkins Freeman. Polly is central, not marginal, to her story, and she is far from being an isolated case. In one of Wilkins's most successful novels, Pembroke, originally published in 1894, nearly all the characters are in some way marked by deformity. In her introduction to the 1899 edition, Wilkins specifically addresses her concern with abnormality and disease, and the promise of a cure through selfless love:

Pembroke was originally intended as a study of the human will in several New England characters, in different phases of disease and abnormal development, and to prove, especially in the most marked case, the truth of a theory that its cure depended entirely upon the capacity of the individual for a love which could rise above all considerations of self, as Barnabas Thayer's love for Charlotte Barnard finally did. (iii)

While her main character, Barnabas Thayer, is the "most pronounced exemplification of this theory," he is hardly the only one. Wilkins explains: "When I make use of the term abnormal, I do not mean unusual in any

sense" (iii-iv). Put another way, the term "abnormal" means for her not those who are outside the norm but those who are pathologically deformed.¹²⁶ And in the New England of her fictional world, they are so common that in many villages "nearly every house contains one or more characters so marked as to be incredible" (vi). The village of Pembroke is such a place.

This is a world with which Wilkins was intimately familiar. In fact, the main plot of Pembroke is based upon an episode that took place in her own family. The story is that Barnabas Lothrop, Wilkins's mother's brother, was engaged to marry a young woman named Mary Thayer. After an argument with Mary Thayer's father, the engagement was broken and Barnabas left town. The house being built for the young couple by Barnabas's father (Wilkins's grandfather) was left empty and unfinished until the marriage of Barnabas's sister (Wilkins's mother) who was then given the house which became Wilkins's home until her family moved to Brattleboro.

In Pembroke, Wilkins reworks and extends this situation into a plot that involves three families whose lives are interlocked by the troubled relationships of a series of couples, with a focus on Barnabas Thayer and Charlotte Bernard, the fictional avatars of Wilkins's uncle and his fiancée.¹²⁷ The event which opens the novel is the uncoupling of Barnabas and Charlotte, resulting from an argument with Charlotte's father. The event which closes the novel, over three hundred pages later, and which departs from the historical event, is their recoupling. What transpires in between is an exploration of marriage and sexuality in a context of repression and emotional deformity.

¹²⁶ Wilkins wrote a similar preface for the 1890 Edinburgh edition of stories from A Humble Romance, this time linking her deformed characters directly with a Puritan tradition: "These little stories . . . were studies of the descendants of Massachusetts Bay colonists, in whom can still be seen traces of the features of will and conscience, so strong as to be almost exaggerations and deformities, which characterized their ancestors" (Foster n. 202).

¹²⁷ The conflation of the names of the two original models for the story, Barnabas Lothrop and Mary Thayer, into the fictional Barnabas Thayer may signify Freeman's view that both sides were equally responsible. This use of family history and the actual names of the original couple suggest that Wilkins may have intended to make a personal connection with the novel and with its main character.

The principal of the novel's families, and the one that is most fundamentally deformed, is the Thayer family, in which Barnabas is the elder son. The Thayers are ruled by the mother, Deborah, while the father, Caleb, is an extremely weak, childlike man. The Thayer's other children are Ephraim, a sickly, undersized, and "twisted" boy who dies of a heart attack while being beaten by his mother for disobeying her orders, and Rebecca, a sexually awakened young woman who becomes pregnant (deformed) out of wedlock, and is then rejected by her mother and ostracized by the community. Barnabas, the main protagonist, begins the novel as a willful but decent young man, on the brink of marrying. However, it is his anger and pride that cause him to break off his engagement after a political argument with his fiancée's father. Determined to deny himself the one person who can bring him happiness, he grows more and more deformed in spirit and body until, by the end of the novel, he is literally transformed into "a curved mass of deformity" (298).

Barnabas's fiancée, Charlotte, is the only child of Cephas and Sarah Bernard, a couple whose relationship is similar to the one depicted by Jonah and Betsey Carey in "Christmas Jenny." Cephas, a willful and stingy old man, dominates the lives of his wife and daughter with his eccentric ways and bizarre theories. Obsessed with the body, Cephas is a vegetarian who believes that eating meat stirs the passions and that drinking gallons of water prevents rheumatism. Although it is Cephas who instigates the argument with Barnabas that breaks the engagement, he is, nevertheless, a fundamentally comical character, whose fanaticism usually leads to little more than making inedible pies out of sorrel. The problem is that his wife, Sarah, conforms to nineteenth-century standards of womanly behavior, having little individual will of her own and sacrificing her own well being and her daughter's happiness by going along with her husband's foolish eccentricities in order to avoid conflict. Charlotte seems to have accepted the same notion of subservience to her father. It is not until Barnabas makes himself so ill that he nearly dies that Charlotte is able to defy her parents and go to her lover's side, although the reader must question whether this represents an act of independence or merely the transference of fealty from one man to another.

Another of the problematic couples in the novel are Sylvia Crane and her suitor, Richard Alger. Although both are single and living alone, they are linked to the Thayers and the Bernards, Sylvia being Charlotte's aunt and Richard being distantly related to Barnabas. Richard has been coming to call on Sylvia every Sunday night for eighteen years, but he has never proposed and she has been unable to declare her feelings. Both are pathetic victims of nineteenth-century prudery, unable to either acknowledge or act upon their repressed desires. Unlike other single women in Wilkins's fiction, such as Christmas Jenny or Louisa Ellis in "A New England Nun," Sylvia is not resigned to her lot as an unmarried woman but she sees no acceptable way to change it. The repressed course of her emotional life has had its tangible effect: "there was something about her out of plumb, as it were. Her nature had been warped to one side by one concentrated and unsatisfied desire" (289). Eventually, after Richard has failed to visit for six months, Sylvia's mind becomes deranged and her fragile economic state as an unmarried woman with no means of support deteriorates. Too proud to ask for help, she nearly starves to death, but as she is being taken away to the poorhouse, Richard finally becomes aware of her desperate condition and proposes to her.

The third family is the Berry's, consisting of the mother, Hannah (the sister of Charlotte's mother and her Aunt Sylvia); the father, Silas, another willful and selfish man who has suffered a mild stroke causing his body to be distorted by a partial paralysis; a son, William, who now runs the family store; and a daughter, Rose. William is the lover of Rebecca Thayer, Barnabas's sister. In contrast to the other two major couples, whose lives are confined by willfulness, repression, and conformity, Rebecca and William are victims of their physical passions and the misguided efforts of others to keep them apart. Rose, his sister, is an even more extreme example of a young woman whose natural sexuality overrides personal and community forces of repression. Blatantly sexual, Rose tries at first to seduce Barnabas but, when her advances are rejected, she thoughtlessly accepts the adoration of Tommy, a slightly retarded "boy-man," who works for her brother. Eventually she marries him, for no other reason than that of "applying to the need of love the rules of ordinary hunger and thirst, and eating contentedly the crust when one could not get the pie, of drinking the water when one could not get

the wine" (268). Although everyone recognizes that Tommy is "not exactly a brilliant match for her," they also know that the marriage saves Rose from the disgrace that would inevitably result from her uncontrollable sexuality.

The structure of Pembroke is like a pyramid of relationships, the primary one being Barnabas and Charlotte, followed by a secondary tier consisting of Sylvia and Richard, Rebecca and William, and Rose and Tommy, with all resting on the three sets of parents, Deborah and Caleb Thayer, Cephas and Sarah Bernard, and Hannah and Silas Berry. Each of these couples appears to be governed by its own pathology and is, in its way, dysfunctional. However, these apparent distinctions eventually blur as individuals and couples become mirrors of each other.¹²⁸ Moreover, since Barnabas and Charlotte are the central characters, whose uncoupling and eventual recoupling dominate the plot, most of these doublings are for the purpose of illuminating their inner natures and relationship, which is to say, of exploring the nature of their emotional deformities.

Barnabas, in particular, appears throughout the novel to be surrounded by mirror images of himself. One might even say that his primary task is to attempt to deconstruct a self that has been formed out of just such perceived resemblances. As the novel opens, on the night when his engagement to Charlotte is broken, Barnabas is likened to his future father-in-law, Cephas Bernard, as the two men stare at each other just moments before their fateful argument: "Barnabas looked back at him unflinchingly, and there was a curious likeness between the two pairs of black eyes" (9). The suggestion of this brief moment of recognition is that both men share the same qualities, those of willfulness and possession, and that were the marriage to go forward as intended, it would replicate the relationship of the Bernards. In a sense, Barnabas has to be transformed before he is suited to

¹²⁸ This thematic linking of characters in the text is reflected, perhaps unconsciously, in the novel's illustrations, for any attempt to differentiate between characters on the basis of appearance, except for those made obvious by generation and gender, is fruitless. The frontispiece is typical: in the foreground is the full-length body of a young woman with her back towards the viewer. On the left is a mirror with the young woman's face and torso reflected in it. On the right, at precisely the same distance, stands a second woman, facing the first and appearing almost identical to the image in the mirror. Three identical faces, forming the three points of an equilateral triangle, represent the reflective natures of Charlotte and Rose, the characters who are depicted.

marry. That transformation, however, involves a process of gradual deformation from a young, tall, handsome, and healthy man into a "curved mass of deformity," from which he finally and miraculously emerges whole.

Another significant moment of mirroring occurs almost exactly halfway through the book when Sylvia mistakes Barnabas for her middle-aged, recalcitrant suitor, Richard. It happens one Sunday evening when Barnabas, who has turned into a virtual hermit after breaking his engagement with Charlotte, is out on a solitary walk during which celibacy and sexuality merge in a nightmarish sequence of events. A note of illicit sexuality is first suggested when Barney thinks he spots his sister, Rebecca, walking with her lover, William, an event he quickly dismisses as impossible, mistakenly assuming that the expression of explicit sexuality would be as impossible for his sister as it is for himself. When Barnabas comes to the home of his former fiancée's maiden aunt, the usually proper Sylvia, who has grown increasingly deranged after Richard stopped coming to see her, she imagines that he is her suitor. In her crazed state of mind, Sylvia breaks all the rules of maidenly demeanor by forcing the man she believes to be her lover to enter her home, declaring her love for him, and begging him to embrace her. In this moment of mistaken identity, Barnabas merges with the older man, so that "[t]he features of Richard Alger instead of his own seemed to look back at him from his own thoughts" as "seemingly with no volition of his own," he takes the elderly old maid in his arms in a bizarre reenactment of his earlier embrace of Charlotte:

Barnabas trembled with Sylvia's sobs. He sat with a serious shamefacedness, his arm around the poor bony waist, staring over the faded fair head, which had never lain on any lover's breast except in dreams. For the moment he could not stir; he had a feeling of horror, as if he saw his own double. There was a subtle resemblance which lay deeper than the features between him and Richard Alger. Sylvia saw it, and he saw his own self reflected as Richard Alger in that straining mental vision of hers which exceeded the spiritual one. (170-1)

Shaken by this shadow encounter with his own repressed emotions, Barnabas reflects on his way home upon the similarities between himself and Richard,

similarities characterized by shared deformities: "Might there not be a closer likeness between characters than features--perhaps by a repetition of sins and deformities? and might not one now and then be able to see it?" (175). This conflation of identities between the two unmarried men and the act of embracing the shadow of his lover, for he now understands that his former fiancée may bear as close a likeness to Sylvia as he to Richard, nearly breaks Barnabas's resistance to resuming his own relationship with Charlotte. But just as he is about to turn into the Bernard property to try to set things right, he is accosted by the sexually aggressive Rose. This final encounter with unleashed female passion, reflecting his fears about both himself and Charlotte, sends him fleeing home in a renewed state of sexual panic.

Shortly after this encounter, Barnabas makes a similar connection between his own sexuality, and "sins and deformities," as he sees his reflection again, this time in the "deformed" face and body of his sister, Rebecca. Rebecca, like Barnabas, has had the course of her relationship with her lover, William Berry, interrupted by the obstinate will of a parent. Her response, however, is very different. Unable or unwilling to repress her sexuality, Rebecca secretly meets William in unsupervised rendezvous until nature takes its course and she becomes pregnant. Although rumors begin to spread in the village, Rebecca's condition is kept from her mother until, while fitting her daughter for a dress, Deborah realizes the truth:

Suddenly her mother gave a great start, pushed the girl violently from her, and stood aloof. She did not speak for a few minutes; the clock ticked in the dreadful silence. Rebecca cast one glance at her mother, whose eyes seemed to light the innermost recesses of her being to her own vision; then she would have looked away, but her mother's voice arrested her.

"Look at me," said Deborah. And Rebecca looked; it was like uncovering a disfigurement or a sore. (192)

Wilkins's phrasing is skillfully ambiguous, leaving the reader to decide whether the uncovered disfigurement is Rebecca's pregnancy or the anger on Deborah's face. In a sense, it is both. Following this revelation, Deborah orders Rebecca out of the house and the girl flees into a snowstorm. Barney is sent to

get her lover William and force the young couple to marry. When he and William finally find Rebecca, she has taken refuge outside town in the home of the local "fallen woman," Mrs. Jim Sloan. Another mirroring takes place between the disgraced Rebecca and Mrs. Sloan, whose unspecified sins have placed her "under a kind of indefinite ban in the village," when the young girl puts on "the mantle of [Mrs. Sloan's] disgrace . . . an old plaid shawl, which she wore summer and winter, and which seemed almost like a uniform" (201).

After the marriage is performed, the previously outcast pregnant girl is admitted back into society by being allowed to live temporarily at the minister's home until William can prepare a home for them. But when Barney goes to visit her there, he experiences such intense feelings of sexual shame that he seems to merge with his sister and, by extension, to all those, including Mrs. Sloan, who have violated the rules of proper sexual behavior. Seeing Rebecca, who has inappropriately given over to physical passions he has repressed, through the eyes of the minister's wife, he imagines that society's condemning gaze is directed toward himself:

Always keenly alive to the shame of the matter, it seemed as if his sense of it were for the moment intensified. The minister's wife's whole nature seemed turned into a broadside of mirrors towards Rebecca's shame and misery, and it was as if the reflection was multiplied in Barney as he looked at her.

Still, he could not take the shame to his own nature as she could, being a woman. (212)

As had been the case when he identified with Richard, this merging of identities is forged in the heat of sexual passion and is revealed in the intensity of the shame that follows. What Barnabas thinks he is unable to share with Rebecca is the literal and visible disfigurement brought on by pregnancy; but he will find a way to create his own deformity.

Before looking at a third mirroring in which those deformities are brought to the surface and materialized in Barnabas's appearance, I want to digress for a moment to look at the mother of Barnabas and Rebecca. Deborah

Thayer is, it would be generally agreed, the novel's most abhorrent character. By dominating the lives of her husband and children, and by her lack of maternal love, she is portrayed as a true monster, whose deformity need not be physical to be obvious. As Melissa McFarland Pennell writes, "Deborah not only has suffered at the hands of her deformed will but has inflicted suffering and deformity upon her children" (Marchalonis 214). Or, as Deborah G. Lambert puts it "Deborah's power transforms her into a freak of nature whose distorted character breeds deranged, illicit behavior in her children and eventually produces illness and death." Because she is an unwomanly woman, providing the novel's only image of a strong woman whose actions are independent of male rule, she is "most monstrous, most unloved, and most wholly defeated" (Marchalonis 205-6).¹²⁹ While Barnabas is the location for Wilkins's ambivalence regarding sexuality, his mother embodies her worst fears about the consequences of unbridled female power and unwomanly behavior.

The full extent of Deborah's monstrous nature as well as the dangers of giving over to unrestrained sexuality are symbolically portrayed by the youngest Thayer in an episode that immediately follows Barnabas's visit to Rebecca. A sickly, undersized, twisted, and perhaps retarded boy, Ephraim is the physical manifestation of the abusive control of his dominating and puritanical mother. In a direct violation of his mother's orders that reflects the sexual violation of his sister Rebecca, the young boy rebels one night by sneaking out for a forbidden ride on Barney's sled, giving him a sensual experience of physical transcendence in which "he trod upon, he outspeeded all infirmities of the flesh in his wild triumph of the spirit" (229). He completes his rebellion by finishing off an entire pie in the middle of the night and by failing, the next day, to complete an assigned chore. When Deborah discovers his defiance, she punishes him with a beating, knowing that his physical disabilities make such punishment dangerous, by rationalizing that "it is better you should be sick than be well and wicked and disobedient. It is better that your body should suffer than your immortal soul"

¹²⁹ This is neither the first nor the last time the word "monstrous" is used specifically to indicate a woman with no maternal feelings. A survey of Western literature might well reveal that this is one of the most common uses of the word.

(239). While she is beating him, "Ephraim made a strange noise and sunk away before it, down in a heap on the floor" (240). Moments later, his heart gives out and he dies.¹³⁰

By repressing his own sexuality, allowing his body to suffer for the sake of what he believes to be his soul, Barnabas has in effect done to himself what his mother had done to Ephraim. His increasing deformity is perceived through another mirroring, this one appropriately seen by his "good" double, Thomas Payne, a perfect Victorian young man who is courting Charlotte in the wake left by Barnabas. Payne is on his way out of town bound for Charlotte's house when he spots Barnabas walking ahead on his way to his own house. As Thomas follows, a kind of perfected shadow of Barnabas, he passes, walking in the opposite direction, a man named "Royal." Royal, who makes his first and only appearance in this scene, is a grotesquely deformed figure whose face, like that of Polly Moss, is "sunken in his feeble chest far below the level of Thomas's eyes" and whose back is "bent like a bow" (294). After Thomas greets the hunchback, he continues on his way, but when he looks up again at the man in front of him, "it seemed to him that Barney Thayer was walking like the man whom he had just met, that his back had that same terrible curve." Eager to clear up the mystery, he catches up with Barnabas and "it seemed as if he turned with the feeble, crooked motion of the other man." When Thomas questions him about his health, Barnabas at first claims that nothing is wrong, then admits that it is not just his back but his very soul that is bent. Throughout this episode, Wilkins cloaks the actual nature of Barnabas's deformity in ambiguity:

Thomas stared at Barney; a horror as of something uncanny and abnormal stole over him. Was the man's back curved, or had he by some subtle vision a perception of some terrible spiritual

¹³⁰ There seems to be a direct link between Wilkins's Barnabas and Ephraim, and Edith Wharton's character, Ethan Frome. Yet Wharton pointedly disparages the work of her predecessors in the introduction to *Ethan Frome*, published in 1911. While it is true that by that time Freeman was no longer writing the starkly realistic works of the 1890's, she still had a reputation as one of the most important writers of her time and it is virtually impossible that Wharton was unfamiliar with her earlier stories and *Pembroke*. It would appear that for Wharton the circumstances of being a woman writer in the early twentieth century made it advantageous to separate as much as possible from a female tradition that was seen as inferior. I return to this point at the end of this chapter.

deformity, only symbolized by a curved spine? . . . it was as if he saw a pale agonized face staring up at him from the midst of a curved mass of deformity. (297-98)

Although Thomas continues to try to determine whether or not Barney is actually deformed by questioning other people in the village, the mystery only increases, for while some seem to see it, other do not, and who is to tell what is real.

Whether Barney Thayer's back was, indeed, bowed into that terrible spinal curve or not, Thomas Payne could not tell by any agreement of witnesses. If some, gifted with acute spiritual insight, really perceived that dreadful warping of a diseased will, and clothed it with a material image for their own grosser senses; or if Barney, through dwelling upon his own real but hidden infirmity, had actually come unconsciously to give it a physical expression, and walked at times through the village with his back bent like his spirit, although not diseased, Thomas Payne could only speculate. (300)

Wilkins's handling of Barnabas's deformity places her in a direct line with Hawthorne. As we have already seen, Wilkins was compared with Hawthorne almost from the beginning of her literary career and in a 1899 essay in the *Atlantic*, Charles Miner Thompson drew a specific comparison between Barnabas Thayer and Hawthorne's Roger Chillingworth. The passage just quoted is also especially reminiscent of "Egotism; or, The Bosom Serpent" (1843), Hawthorne's parable about secret sin. Mary Wilkins Freeman resisted any such comparisons, however, especially towards the end of her career. In her 1919 letters to Pattee (the same letters in which she lies about her age), she initially omits Hawthorne from the list of writers who might have influenced her work and, when Pattee apparently commented on this oversight by noting her kinship to the older writer, responds somewhat curtly: "I do not know if I am 'akin to Hawthorne.' I do not care for him as I care for Tolstoi, Scheinkewitz, and Hardy" (Kendrick 385). John Getz speculates in "'Eglantina': Freeman's Revision of Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark'" (1991) that Freeman may have disavowed her connection with Hawthorne because she feared being remembered only as an imitator of him.

Despite her disclaimer, Wilkins shares with Hawthorne an interest in the workings of the will; the ways internal life, particularly sins or abnormalities, can become manifest in the physical body; and the often tenuous and unreliable relationship between appearances and reality. She goes beyond him, however, in introducing a range of explanations--"realistic" as well as "symbolic"--for her protagonist's apparent deformity. If Barnabas's back is actually bent, it might be, on the one hand, a Hawthornian manifestation of his diseased will, a sign to him and others that he is hiding an inner flaw in his nature; but, on the other hand, as she suggests later in the book, his deformity might be caused by the physical disease of rheumatism, and misinterpreted by himself and others as signifying some internal abnormality. Or, she suggests, perhaps his back is not bent at all. Maybe it is only perceived as being bent by those with the insight to see into his deformed soul. Or maybe Barnabas has willed himself to walk with a bent back, even though it is not really diseased, in recognition of his own sense of his inner deformity. Given the power of the Hawthornian tradition in American literature, our inclination is to assume that Wilkins intended the first explanation as being the "true" one. It is even possible for the reader to overlook the others completely. Perhaps it was in recognition of this that Freeman tried to disconnect herself from the Hawthornian tradition that she feared might circumscribe her meaning.

Whether real or imagined, a result of will or disease, ten years after he had broken his engagement to Charlotte, Barnabas finally becomes too deformed to rise from his bed, having been completely transformed from a healthy young man into a helpless cripple. Before returning to the act which makes him whole, we need to briefly turn attention to the other half of the broken couple, Charlotte.

Compared with Barnabas, Charlotte plays a relatively minor role in the narrative and, unlike most of the other characters, she never appears herself to be deformed. The plot leads us to believe that she is a passive victim of men's stubborn wills. She is, after all, not at all responsible for the argument between Barnabas and her father that caused the breaking of her engagement, and in fact attempted first to head it off and then to repair its damage. When she fails, and the years pass, leaving Barnabas physically and spiritually

twisted, Charlotte quietly resigns herself to a lifetime of being unmarried. There is, in fact, very little difference between her and her aunt Sylvia, the novel's epitome of female repression and passivity, except that Charlotte is too self-reliant to allow herself to become a complete victim to men's power and so she becomes a seamstress so that she can at least support herself. However, her single state is not completely out of her control for, despite the continued rudeness of Barnabas, who refuses even to speak to her, she never gives up her feelings for him, even when she is courted by another man who is, at least in appearance, far more perfect in body and soul. Like Barnabas, Charlotte experiences occasional moments of vision when she is able to perceive the reflection of others within herself. One of those moments occurs late in the novel, just following Payne's encounter with Barnabas on the road, when Charlotte contemplates the two men with whom she might have joined herself:

The fancy pained her, and yet she seemed to see Thomas Payne and Barney side by side, the one like a young prince--handsome and stately, full of generous bravery--the other vaguely crouching beneath some awful deformity, pitiful yet despicable in the eyes of men, and her whole soul cleaved to her old lover. (302)

By cleaving to the deformed Barney, and turning from the handsome and stately Thomas, Charlotte demonstrates a willingness to deny her own sexuality that is as stubbornly willful as her lover's. Yet, even as she does so, she is forced to confront that sexuality as she prepares the bridal clothes for other women. At one such moment, she is visited by images of lover and beloved, self and other, that conflate in a counter fantasy that is both autoerotic and homoerotic:

Her faithful needle, as she sewed, seemed to keep her old wounds open like a harrow, but she never shrank. She saw the sweet, foolish smiles and blushes of happy girls whose very wits were half astray under the dazzle of love; she felt them half tremble under her hands as she fitted the bridal-gowns to their white shoulders, as if under the touch of their lovers.

They walked before her and met her like doppelgangers, wearing the self-same old joy of her own face, but she looked at them unswervingly. It is harder to look at the likeness of one's joy than at one's old sorrow, for the one was dearer. . . .

She was much happier, although she would have sternly denied it to herself, when she was watching with the sick and putting her wonderful needle-work into shrouds, for it was in request for that also. (310-11)

Like Barnabas, Charlotte finds mirror images of herself in the people around her; like him, she prefers those that reflect her own spiritual death to those that represent love and happiness.

The climatic scene occurs when Barnabas has taken to his bed, too deformed to move. Since he is alone and with no one to care for him, Charlotte, in what appears to be her single act of rebellion against her parents and her community, moves into his home to nurse him. She finds "a rigidly twisted, groaning heap under a mass of bed-clothing . . . [who] could not straighten himself up without agonizing pain" (321). It is as if it were not until he had become completely helpless and passive himself, more like a woman in labor than a man, that Charlotte was able to go to him. However, even her act of compassion violates the rigid sexual codes of the community. When the town minister comes to chastise her for her immoral behavior, Barnabas finally is shamed into action, realizing that Charlotte not only has set aside her pride but has risked scandal in order to take care of him. He sends her away and forces himself to rise and walk with a straight back to her home. Putting his arm around her at the door, in the final line of the novel and in a final merging of man and woman, Barnabas "entered the house with his old sweetheart and his old self" (330).

Is this final moment the climax of the marriage plot that it appears to be? Does the triumph of heterosexuality bring about the moral straightening that fixes everyone in the end? The evidence is loaded on both sides of the question. On the one hand, this happy ending seems to contradict everything that went before it. Throughout Pembroke, Wilkins had used the language of

deformity to characterize the consequences of sexual desires, whether those desires were repressed or acted upon. Of the four major couples depicted in the novel, only the uninhibited but naive Rose and Tommy, who treat sexual needs like the need for food seem free from pathology or shame. Even more damning is Wilkins's depiction of couples who are already married, none of whom suggest that fulfilled sexuality might lead to a happy or healthy life. Yet, at times the novel seems to present a celebration of natural and unrestrained sexuality that is unusual for its time. Such moments are the initial scene between Barnabas and Charlotte, the central scene in the cherry orchard in which the sensuous consumption of cherries is the context for mating rituals, and the vision of the blushing brides who tremble under Charlotte's hands. Moreover, Wilkins herself claims, in her introduction to the novel, that its theme is how the diseased human will can be cured by selfless love. This would surely appear to be the message of the final episode when Barnabas miraculously rises from his bed to walk to the home of his beloved.

In her essay "Rereading Mary Wilkins Freeman: Autonomy and Sexuality in Pembroke," Deborah G. Lambert offers a biographical explanation for these apparent contradictions. Connecting the doubling in the novel to Freeman's personal conflicts about marriage, Lambert makes the case that "as Sylvia and Richard are doubles of Charlotte and Barney, so these two, Barney and Charlotte, reduce to one self in conflict--a woman, desiring love and marriage, yet fearing it, fleeing from it, postponing it" (Marchalonis 202). As Lambert points out, Pembroke is "emphatic in reclaiming and revaluing sexuality" while it "simultaneously and powerfully denounces marriage" (204). Seeking an explanation, she suggests that the mirroring couples and the contradictory impulses in Pembroke reflect the desires and fears of Wilkins herself as she contemplated her own future in 1893, having just met Dr. Freeman. This reading is suggestive, as far as it goes. However, Lambert is limited by her assumption of a heterosexual framework which places sexuality only in the context of traditional marriage. Consequently, she misses the suggestion of inverted sexuality implied by the mirroring of Barney and Charlotte. Additional insights into the meanings of Pembroke are possible when we look beyond "normal" cultural constructions to take into account the radical shifts in the construction of sexuality and gender roles taking place

at the turn of the century. In this context, it is possible to suggest that Wilkins's repetitive merging and mirroring of characters, and her equally repetitive depictions of spiritual and physical deformity, may have reflected not only her ambivalence regarding her relationship with Charles Freeman but her fears of being viewed as a pathological social deviant because of the nature of her personal and professional life, especially her relationship with Mary Wales.

Research in the history of sexuality has made it increasingly clear that perceptions of gender and sexuality were changing rapidly in America as well as in Europe during the period when Pembroke, along with much of Wilkins's best work, was written. While nineteenth-century notions of "true womanhood" depicted women as passive and passionless, rendering the term "female sexuality" almost oxymoronic, late nineteenth-century shifts in attitudes, which were being both initiated and reported by the medical profession, gradually began to recognize that women were capable of experiencing sexual pleasure and that they consequently had needs and desires similar to those of men. These shifting paradigms, however, created a conflict in definitions of deviance that must have been confusing even for those women who managed to fall somewhere within the constantly shifting norm. The emotional and behavioral realities of women who lived without men were clearly outside the norm but the nature of their deviance was subject to almost opposing interpretations. On the one hand, the recognition that women were capable of having sexual needs led directly to the view that the sexual abstinence of unmarried women was unhealthy. As example of such an attitude is given by Elaine Showalter in Sexual Anarchy (1990) when she quotes an American obstetrician, Dr. Charles Taylor, who in 1882 "warned that unmarried women needed to protect their health by finding other outlets for their 'unemployed functions,' or suffer the consequences of 'disturbance' and 'weakness'" (21). Wilkins obviously was aware of these post-Victorian views, and they cast a pathological shadow on the lives of her unmarried characters, especially her spinsters, Charlotte Bernard and Sylvia Crane, whose unmarried conditions were no longer simply economic handicaps, but also had the effects of debilitating diseases. On the other hand, despite the opinions of the enlightened regarding the reality of female sexuality, most people, including, for a variety of reasons, most women, still held onto the

Victorian ideology that “decent” women lacked the capacity to experience sexual needs and pleasures, and were, consequently, the passive objects of male desire and aggression. Wilkins’s awareness of the impact of this repressive ideology, still the dominant one in late-nineteenth-century America, is reflected in the way the community defines characters like Rebecca Thayer, Rose Berry, and Mrs. Jim Thorne as deviant and pathological.

These opposing views on the nature of sexuality clarify our understanding of Wilkins’s female characters but fail to completely account for why so many of them, in addition to most of her male characters, seem to fear sexuality and run from it in classic illustrations of sexual panic. I propose that this fear relates directly to Wilkins’s own ambivalence. I am suggesting that in the 1890’s, because of changing attitudes towards female sexuality as well as her new relationship with Charles Freeman, Wilkins’s personal situation was becoming less tenable and that this caused her a great deal of anxiety that found expression in her fiction. In order to understand the nature of her own fears regarding sexuality, we have to examine how the changing constructions of gender and sexuality affected women who were neither single nor in traditional marriages, but in same sex relationships.

As long as Victorian beliefs regarding sexuality prevailed and women were understood to be without sexual feelings of their own, sexuality between women was generally considered to be a virtual impossibility. The exception, and it was an important one, was when one of the women showed evidence of having a masculine character. Such women were understood to have an inverted sexual nature which enabled them to be perceived as being a man in a woman’s body. As George Chauncey, Jr. puts it in his important essay, “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance” (1983): “a complete inversion or reversal of a woman’s sexual character was required for her to act as a lesbian; she had literally to become man-like in her sexual desire” (118). On the other hand, the more feminine member of a same sex relationship was generally perceived to be normal or, at the most, to have only a slight homosexual tendency which could be corrected if she entered a normal relationship with a man. (The situation would be reversed in the case of two men, with the

“female” or passive member being defined as the invert while the one playing the “male” role was understood to be normal.)

To make matters more complicated, the nineteenth-century notion of sexual inversion, in addition to offering an explanation for deviant sexuality, went far beyond physical behavior to encompass a broad range of deviant gender behavior. As a result, any woman who rebelled against the norms that circumscribed a woman’s life, and especially any woman who attempted to assume the power and privileges of men by remaining unmarried and pursuing a career, could be accused of sexual inversion.

The concept of sexual inversion created a particularly difficult situation for a woman like Mary Wilkins who was feminine in appearance and demeanor but who, because of her writing career and her lack of involvement in traditional female activities, could also be viewed as masculine. The fact that she lived with another woman would have heightened the ambiguities in her gender identity. However, so long as Victorian views of female sexuality prevailed, it was relatively easy to hide the sexual nature of same sex relationships, whether actual or repressed, if neither of the parties showed signs of inversion through the presence of overt masculine traits. But, as the nineteenth century came to an end, changing concepts of both sexuality and homosexuality made it more difficult for single women to avoid being labeled as deviant and pathological. As female sexuality began to be increasingly acknowledged as a real emotional and physical experience, close relationships between women of any kind were suspected of having a sexual component, and those relationships that were sexual became more visible, more threatening to society, and consequently, more dangerous for the participants. Same sex institutions, such as boarding schools and prisons, were increasingly suspected of being hotbeds of (homo)sexual activity. By the mid-1880’s, when Wilkins began to live in the Wales home and to develop relationships with other women who formed same sex couples, the concept of lesbianism had appeared in the medical literature, in America as well as in Europe, and the image of the lesbian as a pathological monster or freak had begun to develop.

Given such a situation, it is understandable that the subject of sexuality for Wilkins would have been clouded by issues related to deviance from

socially sanctioned behavior. While Pembroke appears to be explicitly traditional and heterosexual in both its situations and its solutions (except when we read the mirroring of the main characters as blurring distinctions of gender), other works written during the same decade move outside these boundaries to deal explicitly with deviant relationships between women. Two of the most interesting are Wilkins's short stories, "Two Friends" (1887) and "The Long Arm" (1895), both dealing, though in very different ways, with a similar theme.

The earlier of the stories, "Two Friends," was published in 1887 in Harper's Bazar.¹³¹ It is about Sarah Arnold and Abby Vane, two women now getting on in years who have been friends since childhood and have lived together since Sarah's parents died when she was sixteen. Consistent with nineteenth-century theories of inversion, the couple is differentiated along the lines of gender: Abby, who inherited the house they live in from her mother, "did the rough work, the man's work of the establishment, and Sarah, with her little, slim, nervous frame, the woman's work" (52). As the story opens, however, it is clear that Abby, who always has been the stronger of the two, is very ill and will soon die. Sarah at first denies that anything could be wrong and Abby does her best to maintain the lie, even continuing to climb into the cherry trees (there are two, one named for each woman) to pick fruit for Sarah, as she has done all their lives.¹³² Sarah finally is forced to realize that Abby is likely to die when the "Abby tree" fails to bloom to following spring. In a stunning role reversal, she bravely climbs into the trees for the first time, cutting the blooming branches off the "Sarah tree" and tying them on to the bare branches of the other, just to give Abby some hope for the future. This sacrificial act of deforming her own tree for the woman she loves also echoes the lines spoken by Jane Lennox where she describes herself as a

¹³¹ It may be significant that "Two Friends" was published in Harper's the year after Wilkins and Wales first visited its editor, Mary Booth and her companion Anna Wright in their home in New York City. It is also interesting that this story was not listed in the Freeman canon and therefore was virtually unknown until Susan Koppelman reprinted it, with a brief commentary, in American Literary Realism 21 (Fall 1988).

¹³² There is a minor tradition in nineteenth-century literature by women of depicting girls or women in the act of climbing trees as a trope for breaking the bonds of heterosexuality. I have examined this in the works of Sarah Orne Jewett and have noticed instances in Phelps as well.

"graft on the tree of womanhood." As she tries to prepare herself for Abby's death, Sarah begins to anguish about something "awful" she has once done. It seems that long ago Abby had had a suitor who her mother forbade her to marry and who had consequently gone to Mexico. Some years later, Abby's mother relented on her deathbed and told Sarah she would give her consent, but Sarah kept this from Abby. As she explains to a neighbor:

"Oh, I couldn't have it nohow--I couldn't--I couldn't, Mis' Dunbar. Seemed as if it would kill me to think of it. I couldn't have her liken' anybody else, an' gittin' married. You don't know what I'd been through. All my own folks had died before I was sixteen years old, an' Mis' Vane was gone, an' she'd been jest like a mother to me. I didn't have nobody in the world but Abby. I couldn't have it so--I couldn't--I couldn't." (55)

Finally, as Abby lies dying, Sarah confesses, but as it turns out her agonizing guilt had been unnecessary. The final lines of the story read:

The poor sick woman laughed out, with a charming, gleeful ring.

A look of joyful wonder flashed over Sarah's despairing face. She stood staring.

"Sarah," said Abby, "I wouldn't have had John Marshall if he'd come on his knees after me all the way from Mexico." (57)

One of the striking qualities of "Two Friends" is its innocence and the casualness with which the relationship between Abby and Sarah is accepted by their community. Koppelman accounts for this by placing the story in historical perspective, arguing that it

illuminates a time and place in which lifelong partnerships between women were lived publicly with community acceptance. The resolution of the story reaffirms the strength of the connection between two women who have spent their lives loving each other. It portrays a domestic establishment that

supports rather than challenges or undermines community values. The status quo includes devoted female couples. (48)

Koppelman's view is one commonly held about relationships like the one presented by Wilkins, especially following Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's pathbreaking essay, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America" (1975) in which she demonstrates that "from at least the late eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth century, a female world of varied and yet highly structured relationships appears to have been an essential aspect of American society" (53). Numerous scholars who have used Smith-Rosenberg have misapplied her findings to a later period than she intended and to the relationships of women who chose to live their lives together as couples, especially ones that resembled marriages in which each partner assumed a gender-based role. This has created a mistaken impression that same-sex relationships between women were casually accepted around the turn-of-the-century as "normal." Smith-Rosenberg herself dates the entrance of the socially suspect "New Woman" around the 1870's in "The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis, 1870-1936" (1985). Other scholars such as Martha Vicinus, in "Distance and Desire: English Boarding School Friendships, 1870-1920" (Duberman, et al, 1989) and George Chauncey, Jr. have provided ample evidence that same sex relationships were being scrutinized by the late nineteenth century. Although so-called "Boston marriages" were common in the later part of the nineteenth century, they were also subject to scathing criticism, as for example in a work like James's The Bostonians (1885), in which the relationship between Olive and Verena was pathologized. While there is no doubt that the relationship depicted in "Two Friends" is treated in a positive light, I would argue that this has more to do with Wilkins's feelings about her relationship with Wales, and the nature of the relationships among her acquaintances, such as her publisher Mary Booth and her companion Anna Wright, than with a general social acceptance of intimate relationships between women.

In fact, a very different perspective on a similar situation is presented just eight years later in a prize-winning mystery story that Wilkins collaborated on with her friend Joseph Edgar Chamberlin. "The Long Arm"

(1895) is narrated in journal form by Miss Sarah Fairbanks, a twenty-nine-year-old schoolteacher who is attempting to clear herself from the charge of murdering her father. She is the prime suspect of the murder because she is the only person with a motive who lacks an alibi. Not only had Sarah's father opposed her five year engagement to Henry Ellis, a young man who she loves and wants to marry (also a suspect for a short while until cleared by an alibi), but she had been the only other person in the house when the murder took place, and all entrances were found to be locked from the inside. In addition, as the reader knows, she herself has found her silk gown in her closet covered with blood, suggesting to an audience primed by the new psychology that in her repressed state of mind she may have been unconsciously driven to commit the act and does not herself realize what she has done. As it turns out, however, she is not the guilty party.

Living next door to the Fairbanks are Phoebe Dole and Maria Woods, described as "two old maiden ladies" who earn their living as dressmakers. As the story unfolds, through the gradual accumulation of evidence discovered by Sarah and a helpful detective, we learn that in his youth, Sarah's father had courted Maria and that she had loved him in return. However, when she was still a girl, Maria had promised Phoebe that she would never marry and holding her to her word, Phoebe had prevented the marriage. Mr. Fairbanks went on to marry Sarah's mother, and Phoebe and Maria remained together. However, when he became a widow, Sarah's father resumed his courtship of Maria and in order to prevent the marriage from happening, Phoebe killed the elderly suitor. When she finally confesses, she explains:

She was going to marry your father--I found it out. I stopped it once before. This time I knew I couldn't unless I killed him. She's lived with me in that house for over forty years. There are other ties as strong as the marriage one, that are just as sacred. What right had he to take her away from me and break up my home? (174).

Sarah responds to this confession with shock, first that a woman could have done the murderous deed and then that she could so calmly confess. She remarks "I believe in demoniacal possession after this" (177). Phoebe's

pervverted and pathologized nature is signified by two other details: first, we learn that Phoebe committed the murder dressed in the male victim's overalls, having first taken off her dress and second, we find out that she was able to enter the house by unlocking the door with her "almost abnormally long arm" (169). It is an interesting reoccurrence of cross-dressing and physical abnormality.

Although Wilkins co-authored the story with Chamberlin, it would appear that the initial idea for the story as well as most of the writing was hers. According to an account given by Chamberlin in 1931, it was Wilkins who first noticed the prize offer and suggested they collaborate. While Chamberlin proposed that they invent a solution to the famous Borden murders which took place in August 1892, the actual plot was Wilkins's. Wilkins wrote the story, which is over forty pages long, in three days and gave it to Chamberlin who adapted it to the contest requirements (Kendrick 122). Until recently, it was assumed that the sole inspiration for the story was the Borden case, as Chamberlin had suggested, but Lillian Faderman has noted its resemblance to another highly publicized murder that also took place in 1892, in which a Tennessee woman named Alice Mitchell was convicted of killing her companion Freda Ward, in order to prevent her from marrying (292-93). The plot of "The Long Arm" appears to be a conflation of these two actual murder cases, in which Wilkins uses the motive in the Mitchell case as a solution to the Borden murders that exculpates Lizzie. The idea was successful for the co-authors won the two thousand dollar prize. When the story was reprinted in Carolyn Wells's American Detective Stories (1927), it was attributed only to Wilkins.

Regardless of the specific source, it is clear that Wilkins was the principle author and that she meant to depict a relationship between two women that was characterized by dominance and brutality rather than by affection. This is not the idyllic female world that we had seen in "Two Friends," but instead a pervverted version of that world as a pathologized deviant nightmare. Although the relationship between Abby and Sarah had been characterized by role differentiation, in which Abby did the man's work and appeared to be the stronger of the two, while Sarah did the woman's and seemed to be the more subordinate, it also had been a relationship ruled by

mutual caring and devotion in which role reversals were also possible. The relationship between Phoebe and Maria, on the other hand, is portrayed as being fundamentally pathological, in which Phoebe's masculine nature allows her to gain complete control over the "sweet child-like" Maria as well as to commit a brutal murder.

Both of these relationships are defined by the theory of sexual inversion that was seen as characteristic of lesbian relationships in the 1880's and 1890's, according to which a relationship between two women would follow the pattern of heterosexuality in which the "male" member would be defined as an invert and the "female" member would be seen either as normal or as having only slight homosexual tendencies. Such an arrangement could be seen as being relatively benign--a convenient division of labor, as in "Two Friends"--or it could be perceived as involving an evil manipulation of power, which was more usually the case. The following description by Allan MacLane Hamilton in 1896 is typical:

The offender was usually the masculine type, . . . [holding views which were] erratic, 'advanced,' and extreme, and she nearly always lacked the ordinary modesty and retirement of her sex. The passive agent was, as a rule, decidedly feminine, with little power of resistance, usually sentimental or unnecessarily prudish. . . . [T]he weak victim can be made the tool of the designing companion. (Chauncey 126)

Clearly the relationship between the aggressive and dominant Phoebe and the passive subservient Maria is consistent with these kinds of attitudes.

It is tempting to try to account in some way for the apparent shift in the way Wilkins's depicted two relationships between women which were, in other respects, not only similar to each other but similar to her own relationship with Mary John Wales. Does this mean that the increasing condemnation of lesbian relationships during the late nineteenth century was beginning to affect her, causing her to realize that her own relationship might be pathological? Does it signal some kind of trouble in her relationship with Wales, a hint that Wilkins may have seen herself as being under the sway of her companion's stronger nature? (A playful hint of this kind of

dominance is found in Garland's account of Wales as being "almost her jailor and task-master," recounted earlier.) In early 1895, when the story was being written, Wilkins was still living with Wales but had met Charles Freeman two years before. Does this story signal her desire to get out of her relationship with Wales in order to marry Freeman? And if so, was it because she had fallen in love with a man or because she needed to prove her normality? Or, to take a more cynical position, were her plot and characters constructed for the sole purpose of winning a large cash prize by reflecting current sensationalist attitudes that she and her friends knew to be ridiculous? My own tendency is to allow some plausibility to all of the above. Each possible explanation is in some way consistent with what we know about Wilkins and her life through biographical facts and what is revealed in her other writings.¹³³ While some explanations seem to be inconsistent with others, elements of them all could co-exist and blend together.

Whatever the reasons, Mary Wilkins did leave Mary John Wales to marry Charles Freeman five years after writing "The Long Arm." This did not, however, signal an end to her exploration of the nature of relationships that were homosexual as well as heterosexual, healthy as well as pathological. Other critics have commented on the lesbian content in two of her most successful novels, The Portion of Labor (1901), written just before her marriage, and The Shoulders of Atlas (1907).¹³⁴ I want to focus here on a novel that, although more artistically flawed than others written during the same period, has interest in light of the issues I have been examining.

By the Light of the Soul was published by Harpers in January 1907, exactly five years after the author's marriage to Charles Freeman. It is dedicated to Harriet and Carolyn Alden, two of her publisher's daughters, who were among her closest friends in Metuchen. Prior to its publication, Freeman appears to have felt some hesitation about the book's reception, not

¹³³ A minor but significant point is that Freeman often used the name "Maria" for a character that had autobiographical elements. We see her use this name again in By the Light of the Soul.

¹³⁴ Even Westbrook has noted that "Sylvia's . . . attachment to Rose [in The Shoulders of Atlas], though she herself regards it as maternal, is clearly homosexual" (119).

on aesthetic but on moral grounds. In writing to her editor, Freeman put a light tone on her apprehensions, hoping that the book would sell its relatively small first edition, "because some people may think the book is ethically wrong, and that always seems to sell a book" (Kendrick, 320). Despite her concerns, Freeman was proud of this novel (unlike Doc Gordon, also published in 1907, which in the same letter she says she wishes she had never written). She may have had a deeper reason than sales for worrying about whether people might think the work "ethically wrong" because according to her cousin, Harriet Lothrop Belcher, the novel was autobiographical (Foster, 56). Freeman herself never suggested this publicly and probably would have denied any connection between her fiction and her own life.¹³⁵

Autobiography or not, ethically wrong or not, contemporary critical responses to By the Light of the Soul were generally negative, primarily because of the absurdity of the main plot. Later assessments of the novel's worth have not been much better, although her biographer, Foster, who followed Mrs. Belcher's lead by dubbing it "lightly disguised spiritual autobiography," found the book "rewarding however as a comment on Mrs. Freeman's emotional and spiritual growth, especially on her conception of the 'old maid'" (170). For similar reasons, the novel warrants attention here.

By the Light of the Soul is the story of the moral development of its heroine, Maria Edgham. Its subtext, however, is a condemnation of heterosexual relationships, especially marriage as a legal institution. At the outset of the novel, Maria is portrayed as a typical middle-class, boy-crazy young girl, obsessed with her own physical appearance and tending to judge others the same way. The first few pages focus on the importance of physical attractiveness in an explicitly heterosexual context, as Maria's pink gingham is described as "the mating plumage of a bird" (4) and the narrator remarks on her "nightly custom" of gazing at herself in the mirror in what "might have been regarded as a sort of fetich [sic] worship of self" (15). Maria is shaken from this complacent existence by a series of important events. The first is the death of her mother, a harsh woman from New England with an

¹³⁵ Freeman is the only one of the writers in this study who did not write an autobiography and she made it clear on a number of occasions that she did not approve of writing of a personal nature.

"abnormally active" conscience, who tries her best to deflate her daughter's ego, but who, nonetheless, Maria "loved . . . down to the depths of her childish heart" (14), so that her death made her sometimes feel like "nothing but a bereft child in a vacuum of love" (35). The second is the remarriage of her father to Ida Slome, Maria's schoolteacher, and the object of a schoolboy "crush" on the part of Wollaston Lee, a boy Maria thinks she loves, who later will play a major role in the plot. Ida Slome is another of Freeman's monstrous women who, although she is physically attractive, is "so unemotional as to be almost abnormal" (89). Ironically, the only good to come from Ida is the birth of her daughter, Evelyn, which allows Maria to step in as a primary surrogate mother.¹³⁶ So powerful is her passion for her half-sister, which becomes increasingly sexualized as the novel progresses, that the narrator attributes Maria's abnormal emotional development and her lack of interest in boys to her love for her baby sister, even using the code word for homosexuality, "inverted":

Maria, as sometimes happens, had a rather inverted system of growth. With most, dolls come first, then boys; with her, dolls had not come at all. Boys came first, then her little baby sister, which was to her in the place of a doll, and the boys got promptly relegated to the background. (102)

The third significant event in Maria's life is the one upon which the plot turns and which evoked the use of critical terms like "absurd" from Walter de la Mare and "gratuitously painful" from the *Atlantic* (Marchalonis 7). When Maria is still a school girl and Evelyn a mere toddler, the younger sister disappears and is thought to have gotten on the train to New York. Maria impulsively goes after her, accompanied by Gladys, a not very bright girl friend of slightly lower social status, and Wollaston Lee, the boy about whom she had once daydreamed (before her mother's death), but in whom she no longer has any interest. Believing they have missed the last train home and fearing they will have to spend the night in the city, Gladys convinces Maria and Wollaston that they must marry to avoid social scandal.

¹³⁶ It is possible that Freeman had in mind her close friend Evelyn Sawyer (Severance) in naming Maria's beloved sister.

They do. It is a moment of painful parody regarding the social pressures to conform to ridiculous codes of behavior. Regrets are immediate and Maria's response to the sham marriage is more revealing than the preposterous event itself. When she returns home, and Evelyn has been found, she is too upset to sleep. In words that recall accounts of Freeman's own difficulties with nightmares, she lies in bed, "overcome by a nervous stress which almost maddened her. Faces seemed to glower at her out of the blackness of the night, faces which she knew were somehow projected out of her own consciousness, but which were none the less terrific" (184-5). Her panic is expressed in explicitly sexual terms: "Maria, little, slender, trembling girl, with all the hysterical fancies of her sex crowding upon her, all the sufferings of her sex waiting for her in the future, and with no mother to soften them, slipped out of bed, stole across the room, and opened the door with infinite caution." She goes to seek comfort from one of the servants, but Annie, who had a sweetheart and "was not altogether what she should be" was not in her bed, causing a scandal of a different sort the following day, which comes to its own climax when she is dismissed for being pregnant. Desperate for love, Maria goes to her sister's room and carries the sleeping child back to bed with her where the two girls lie in each other's arms until morning. The next day Wollaston, trying in his way to be manly, offers to do the honorable thing and quit school to make the marriage real but Maria wants nothing to do with him and swears him to secrecy along with Gladys, so that the undesired and unconsummated marriage is allowed to stand, unknown to anyone but these three. These sequential scenes, juxtaposing the heroine's fear and loathing when threatened with the reality of heterosexuality, her desire for the comfort of other women, and her dismissal of men as inadequate when confronted with a real problem, suggest the nature of Freeman's own attitudes.

The rest of the lengthy novel is driven by this bizarre event which gives Maria an excuse for avoiding heterosexual relationships that might lead to marriage. Unable to be receptive to another suitor, Maria becomes a school teacher and moves to New England, the homeland of her mother. For a short while, she is attracted to a young man named George Ramsey, but when another girl wants him, she encourages the relationship and directs her own passion to George's distant cousin, a young abused girl named Jesse whose

mother is a prostitute. Then, as Evelyn grows up, the relationship between the two sisters continues to be described in increasingly sexualized terms. When Maria returns home for a visit, the two meet with undisguised physical passion:

Evelyn only clung the closer. There was a strange passion in the look of her big eyes as she glanced up at her sister. . . . She was glowing and tingling with emotion and life and feeling in every nerve and vein. As she clung to her sister she trembled all over her lithe little body with the violence of her affection for her. (352)

When their father dies, Evelyn, now nearly grown, joins Maria in New England to attend the school where she teaches. Just as things begin to settle down, Wollaston appears as the new headmaster of the school. At first Maria is overwhelmed by feelings of loathing and horror she can barely contain:

Such a deadly fear was over her that her class-room and the great pile of school buildings seems to her fancy as horrible as a cage of wild beasts. She felt such loathing of the man who was legally, although not really, her husband, that the loathing itself filled her with shame and disgust at herself. She told herself that it was horrible, horrible, that she could not endure it, that it was impossible. She was in a fairly desperate mood. (389)

Then, with no explanation, Maria suddenly and magically loses her "old terror and disgust," and appears to fall in love with Wollaston, but just as she does, she learns that Evelyn is also passionately in love with him. This revelation precipitates another emotional crisis and Maria is overwhelmed by feelings of her own abnormality and deformity: "A sort of incredulity, as of the monstrous and the super human seized her. She felt as one who had survived a railroad accident might feel looking down upon his own dismembered body in which life still quivered" (434). The dilemma is absurd but convincingly painful. Maria is finally in love with her legal husband and he seems to care for her, but if they make their marriage public, her sister Evelyn will be heartbroken and die. After experiencing a kind of religious epiphany in which she realizes she must give up Wollaston, Maria at first

proceeds to deform herself, making herself appear to be ugly and grotesque so that Wollaston will lose interest in her. But this move only puts the dilemma on Wollaston's shoulders, for even though he is attracted to Evelyn, he cannot allow himself to respond to her because he is already legally married. Maria believes she cannot publicly give him up and annul the marriage. No matter what she does, she feels she is bound to hurt Evelyn, the person she loves the most. So Maria does the only thing she can--she runs away.

Now, in the last eighteen pages of the novel, comes the fourth significant event in Maria's life. On the train, Maria meets "a tiny, deformed woman, a dwarf" (479). The strange woman offers Maria some tea and introduces herself, emphasizing, as she does so, her unmarried state and her deviance:

"My name is Blair--Miss Rosa Blair," said the dwarf. "I am a rose, but I happened to bloom outside the pale." She laughed gayly, but Maria's eyes upon her were pitiful. "You are also outside the pale in some way," said Miss Blair. "I always know such people when I meet them. There is an affinity between them and myself. The moment I saw you I said to myself: she also is outside the pale, she also has escaped from the garden of life. Well, never mind, child; it is not so very bad outside when one becomes accustomed to it." (483)

Obviously rich, the dwarf invites Maria to her home when their train arrives in New York late at night, informing Maria that it would be scandalous and dangerous to spend the night as a single woman in a hotel, echoing the circumstances that had once caused the original disastrous marriage. Thus, a beneficial relationship with a woman is developed that corrects the earlier mistake of an unwanted heterosexual marriage. Both of Maria's actions--her marriage to Wollaston and her acceptance of the invitation to go home with Rosa--result from her attempts to avoid social transgression. But by going to Rosa's home, Maria discovers how to construct a world in which one can feel "normal," despite one's inherent abnormality.¹³⁷ Instead of trying to conform

¹³⁷ The description of Rosa Blair's home resembles both Freeman's actual home and her fantasies of her ideal home. The furniture in the bedroom where Maria stayed is white, as

with society by marrying, she learns how to create her own alternative world. As the opposite of a Procrustean bed, Rosa's house has been designed to conform with its inhabitant's deviant body, not with society's norms: "To Maria's utter amazement, she [Rosa] no longer seemed in the least deformed, she no longer seemed a dwarf. She was in perfect harmony with the room, which was low ceiled, full of strange curves and low furniture with curved backs." Even Maria is out of place in this room created for the deformed: "She felt herself large, coarse, and common where she should have been tiny, bizarre, and, according to the usual standard, misformed." Rosa instructs Maria on the principles by which she has reconciled herself to her own strange life:

"Beauty is only a matter of comparison, you know," said she. "If one is ugly and misshapen, all she has to do is to surround herself with things ugly and misshapen, and she gets the effect of perfect harmony, which is the highest beauty in the world. Here I am in harmony after I have been out of tune. It is a comfort. But, after all, being out of tune is not the worst thing in the world. It might be worse. I would not make the world over to suit me, but myself to suit the world, if I could. After all, the world is right and I am wrong, but in here I seem to be right. Now, child, tell me about yourself." (489-90)

Like a character from a fairy tale, the dwarf helps Maria shed her old identity and construct a new one, although she does it in a not so magical way by placing a fake obituary in the newspaper and taking Maria out of the country for a year in Europe. When Maria returns to New York, and is tempted to reveal the truth to her sister and aunt, she justifies her decision to perpetuate the lie by the rationalization that in the end they are all better off without her, even though this means Wollaston unknowingly will be a bigamist and she will never be able to see her sister again. What really happens is that when Maria goes back to New England to reveal herself, she hides outside her old

Freeman's was. Reference is made to a "misformed bronze idol" that was one of the objects in Freeman's home (and evokes Harriet Spofford). Most significantly, the house is miniature, resembling the "little toy house, in which I could do just as I pleased," for which Freeman humorously longed in a letter to her friend, Marion Boyd Allen, written in 1907, the year of the novel's publication (Kendrick 326).

house and looks into the window at the idyllic scene in which the perfect heterosexual couple, Wolleston and Evelyn, are framed. At this moment, as a self-imposed outcast, she realizes the power of her feelings for her female companion:

She thought of Rosa Blair, and an intense longing came over her. She seemed to suddenly sense the highest quality of love: that which realizes the need of another, rather than one's own. The poor little dwarf seemed the child of her heart. (497-8)

In Rosa Blair, Maria finally has found her true mate, a deviant like herself, who offers nurturing and financial support without the threat of masculine dominance or male sexuality.¹³⁸ Rosa has the money and the sophistication to protect Maria and care for her as neither of her own parents had been able, and she ends up formally adopting Maria, legally assuming the place of her mother. Yet, the relationship is equal and mutually beneficial, for the dwarf takes the place of Evelyn, the younger sister who as a surrogate child had always been Maria's primary love. As is often the case with romantic friendships between women in the nineteenth century and earlier, the relationship between Rosa and Maria is initially defined on the model of the mother and daughter relationship, but the resemblance is not literal for nurturance is mutual and roles are interchangeable.¹³⁹ As Rosa says to Maria: "You are sheltering me as well as I am sheltering you" (485).

¹³⁸ It must, of course, be noted that *By the Light of the Soul*, perhaps Freeman's strongest condemnation of heterosexual marriage and her most explicit endorsement of the power of relationships between women, came five years after she left Mary Wales, her companion of eighteen years, to enter a traditional marriage to Dr. Freeman. Foster was puzzled by this apparent "divagation" from the author's own "emotional and spiritual development" and attempted to account for it by speculating that "Mrs. Freeman preferred to avoid marriage as a solution because it would lead her readers toward understanding of the novel's autobiographical elements" (171). This attempt to avoid the lesbian implications of the novel by assuming that Freeman was trying to throw her readers off the track of her "real" (i.e. heterosexual) meaning is an example of the absurd lengths some twentieth century critics have gone to maintain blinders to homosexual content and activities in literary works and writers.

¹³⁹ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has pointed out in "The Female World of Love and Ritual" that "[a]n intimate mother-daughter relationship lay at the heart of this female world" (64). The mutually nurturing relationship between Maria and Rosa may be a carry-over from this more innocent time. However, the modeling of erotic and affectional relationships between women on the primal relationship with the mother also can be seen as far back as the eighteenth-century

Although the novel is, in a sense, a love story with an unusual marriage at its ending, Rosa is not just a mate for Maria. She is also a doppelganger or double for the heroine (and, I might add, for the author), whose physical deformity is a material reflection of the internal deformity felt but not visibly embodied in the perfectly formed Maria. This similarity between Maria and Rosa is first seen by Rosa when she recognizes the "affinity" between herself and Maria, but it is not fully acknowledged by Maria until she recognizes the dwarf as "the child of her heart." The choice of a dwarf as the doppelganger for the heroine has special significance in the work of a writer who often characterized herself as unusually little (recall that her nickname was Dolly). This tendency to diminish herself and to be diminished by others is reflected in attitudes towards Freeman's writings as well as her person, which were typically described, by herself as well as by critics, as small, short, little. One might speculate that it was to counter just this limitation that Freeman insisted on attempting the larger form of the novel, even though critics then and later saw her strength to be the short story. Perhaps her choice of a dwarf as a double for her heroine reflected her awareness that her writings would continue to be assessed as small and childlike, regardless of her attempts to expand into larger subjects and genres.

By the Light of the Soul is a deeply flawed novel that is redeemed by the subtext that lies below its surface. As a novel, its plot is absurd and its characters barely believable; but viewed as a spiritual autobiography, it says much about its author's ambivalence regarding traditional marriage and heterosexual relationships, and her intense feelings of her own physical and psychological deviance. Beyond this biographical interest, the significance of the work goes beyond the purely personal, however, especially when we place it in the context of her time. Mary Wilkins Freeman was an immensely popular and highly regarded writer during her lifetime. This would not have been true had she not captured themes that resonated with the concerns of the men and women around her. I want to suggest that these themes emerged from the radical changes in definitions of gender and sexuality taking place in America (as well as in Europe) at the turn of the century, and

in a work like the English feminist utopia, Millenium Hall, as well as in contemporary lesbian literature of the late twentieth century.

the resulting fears of individual men and women that behaviors that deviated from a rapidly shifting norm meant that they were on some fundamental level abnormal. Even more specifically, I propose that as the concept of homosexuality increasingly became pathologized during this period, one of the secret fears felt by many women and men whose primary sexual and affectional relationships were with members of the same sex was that they would be labeled as freaks. By the Light of the Soul is one of the novels which most specifically captures these fears. The unspeakable secrets which haunt the novel throughout have to do with sexuality, and suggest intense shame and sexual confusion. The representation of the heroine--through her doppelganger--as a deformed freak suggests a profound sense of personal deviance that places the individual in an isolated world outside the boundaries of society or, as Rosa Blair puts it, "outside the pale." Moreover, the essential and unchangeable nature of Rosa's deviance, as opposed to Barnabas's more ambiguous deformity that may have been both caused and cured by his own will, suggests that having attempted to conform to society's standard of normal sexual behavior by entering a traditional heterosexual marriage, Freeman may have concluded that deviance was a matter of birth not choice.

I want to return for a moment to the "Jane Lennox" fragment introduced in the beginning of this chapter. Placing the fragment within the context of Freeman's other works, it now becomes plausible to speculate that Freeman concluded late in her life that she was constitutionally unable to make a normal claim to her birthright, that like Jane Lennox, she was a graft on the tree of womanhood, a hybrid who others might perceive as a monster. Although this deviance can be seen as a perversion of "decent" life, it also is by definition an heroic challenge to the rules of the universe in which she can feel pride. Freeman's Jane Lennox fragment bears an uncanny resemblance to two unusual autobiographies written by Mary MacLane, a woman from Montana, whose exclusive topic was herself. In The Story of Mary MacLane (1902) and I, Mary MacLane (1917), she wrote about her own life and feelings in an egocentric and sensationalist way that brings eccentricity to the brink of madness. Although she makes it very clear that she has spent her life as a single woman, indeed, as one who is and has been extraordinarily lonely, she purposefully shocks the reader with revelations

about her sexual passions and activities, including those for and with women, as well as not very subtle allusions to masturbation. Moreover, in the second book, she explicitly labels herself as a Lesbian. The books apparently were well-known. In a short essay written for the Saturday Evening Post in 1917 (the year the second MacLane book was published, and ironically titled "An Autobiography," Freeman expresses her own disapproval of personal writings with a reference to the kind written by MacLane: "Bald facts are not especially interesting, and one cannot offer much besides bald facts unless one happens to be of the Mary MacLane type of writer" (Marchalonis 65). This is the first line of the essay. It is followed by a strange and painful repudiation of her own popular story, "The Revolt of Mother." Freeman's reference to MacLane confirms her familiarity with her books and this, coupled with a resemblance in subject matter and style, suggest that the Lennox fragment may have been an effort both to outdo and to specifically contrast herself with the more flamboyant and self-exposing MacLane. In other words, there is evidence to support a speculation that Freeman may have shared MacLane's feelings of intense deviance but chose to express them in narrative fiction rather than in autobiography.

Freeman's themes are familiar ones. We have seen them in the women writers who are the other subjects of this study and we see them carried on into the twentieth century by writers, men as well as women, who viewed themselves as socially and sexually deviant in an American society that became increasingly more rigid in its definitions of gender roles and sexual behaviors. More than any of the other writers included in this study, Freeman is a transitional figure between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Her work has usually been relegated to the nineteenth century and the New England local color movement, but the majority of her important works were written during the two decades that split evenly before and after the turn of the century, a period when local color was blending into naturalism, and the modern era was coming into being. Although her works first appeared in the family magazines that gained popularity during the

nineteenth century, she lived to hear her stories read on the radio and to see her novels adapted for the new motion picture.¹⁴⁰

If it is true that the torch of literature was passing from the women writers of the domestic tradition who gained popularity during the latter half of the nineteenth century to the men who embraced the cult of masculinity and who dominated the first half of the twentieth century, Freeman was the one who passed it on. Certainly, she was seen by many of the younger male writers at the turn of the century as an important role model whose style and subject matter were models for the generation to come. I have already made reference to Freeman's influence on her slightly younger contemporary, Hamlin Garland, whose interviews in 1887, just after the publication of her first collection of stories and four years before the publication of his own first volume, questioned her on her views on truth, her use of local subject matter, and her representations of dialect, and helped form his own articulation of literary realism. In 1894, the young poet, Edwin Arlington Robinson, then twenty-five and not yet published, noted, in a letter to a friend, Wilkins's "frankness and nerve," and especially, "a few animal touches that are hardly like anything else that I have ever seen in novels" (Marchalonis 4). The young naturalist writer, Frank Norris, viewed Wilkins as "one of the leaders" of the new literary reaction against sentimentalism and was so outraged by the publication in 1900 of what he termed "a colonial romance" that he wrote to a friend that "it is as if a captain, during action, had deserted to the enemy" (Marchalonis 6). Although, Mary Wilkins Freeman cut an unlikely figure for a captain in the cultural wars being waged at the turn of the last century, especially one leading the charge of the new masculine writers, these writers could recognize a kindred spirit when they saw one. Twentieth-century women writers were apparently less able to. It is striking as well as disappointing that Edith Wharton, for example, in her

¹⁴⁰ According to Kendrick, radio broadcasts aired during Freeman's lifetime included "The Revolt of Mother," "Gentian," "The Village Singer," "The Kitchen Colonel," and other stories (2). Motion pictures documented by Kendrick include a film adaptation of Bunyon's "The Pilgrim's Progress," written by Freeman in collaboration with William Dinwiddie, produced in 1915 (277); "An Alabaster Box," based on her own novel of that name, screenplay written by Freeman in collaboration with Florence Morse Kingsley, produced by Vitagraph in 1917 (280); and "False Evidence," based on her 1896 novel, *Madelon*, produced by Metro Pictures in 1919 (369).

introduction to Ethan Frome, whose relationship to Pembroke, written less than ten years before, I have already noted, was unable or unwilling to acknowledge the work of her predecessor. As if she had never read a word of Freeman's, Wharton negated everything the older writer had accomplished when she wrote that "I had an uneasy sense that the New England of fiction bore little--except a vague botanical and dialectical--resemblance to the harsh and beautiful land as I had seen it" (v). As the twentieth century advanced, male critics and writers managed to gain such a powerful hold on the literary world that a whole generation of women writers who were their models were soon obliterated. It is significant that Hamlin Garland, who had been so impressed by Freeman when he was himself a young writer rebelling against the romanticism of a previous generation, represented the male literary establishment of the American Academy of Letters when he awarded the Howells medal to Freeman at the end of her life. By the time her name was carved on the door of the academy, her work had been almost forgotten.

5. Shifting Images of Deviance and Defiance: Charlotte Perkins Gilman

"The Yellow Wallpaper," the first published short story by the feminist writer, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, has been seen by some critics as a paradigmatic text. In a sense, it is for me as well, for my entire project has been to discover, or uncover, the deformed bodies that lie at the heart of women's texts written during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in America, and to "read" the meanings they convey. Like the grotesque designs in the yellow wallpaper that serves as the central image in Gilman's story, these deformed figures are simultaneously visible and hidden, for although they are explicitly described in the narrative, their meanings are shifting and unclear. Like Gilman's narrator, the readers of these narratives are compelled to engage in interpretative acts which, by necessity, are defined by their individual and social experiences. The analogy is not a total one, however. Unlike the yellow wallpaper, the literary texts which are the subjects of this study, including "The Yellow Wallpaper" itself, have inherent meaning; they are more than material upon which to project our own private desires and preoccupations. Whenever we are engaged in acts of interpretation with the intent of exposing and deciphering the meanings hidden in texts of another time, we must guard against reading these works only through the lens of our own experience and cultural assumptions. One way to do so is by using all the material at hand that can assist us in understanding the texts and the writers who produced them. The personal and social circumstances I document on the following pages are meant to provide a broad context within which to reread Gilman's first published and now most famous story, "The Yellow Wallpaper." In my interpretation, I make use of biographical material that has previously been either ignored or considered irrelevant to Gilman's fiction but which, I argue, provides an important key to understanding this enigmatic text.

Throughout this study, I have examined the representation of the abstract and socially-constructed concepts of normality and deviance through the physical depiction of bodily form, focusing especially on the figure of the deformed woman. The relationship between social behavior and the body was of special interest to Gilman, and one she explored in her fictional and

analytical writings. In her 1914 satirical short story about role reversal titled "If I Were A Man," for example, Gilman described her heroine, a perfectly normal young American wife and mother, in the following way: "pretty little Mollie Mathewson . . . was 'true to type.' She was a beautiful instance of what is reverentially called 'a true woman.' Little, of course--no true woman may be big. Pretty, of course--no true woman could possibly be plain" (32).

Throughout her career Gilman, who was herself tall and athletic, campaigned against an ideal image of women that forced them, as she wrote in her first book, Women and Economics (1898), to be "small, weak, soft, ill-proportioned" (46). Seeing a direct connection between the political power men have traditionally held over women and women's physical form, Gilman argued in The Man-Made World (1911) that "[t]his ultra littleness and ultra femaleness has been demanded and produced by our Androcentric Culture" (210).

Like the other writers I have examined in this study, Gilman recognized the mirror-like relationship between ideal and deformed images of women. This connection between the normative and the deviant body has been explored by twentieth-century feminists as well, as we continue to struggle with the difficulties many girls and women experience in accepting bodies that deviate from a narrowly defined ideal. Drawing a comparison between the nineteenth century and our own times, Gilbert and Gubar made the following comment on the causal relationship between the physical diminishment of women and the loathing many develop for their bodies as they simultaneously aspire to achieve and rebel against an artificial standard of beauty:

Learning to become a beautiful object, the girl learns anxiety about--perhaps even loathing of--her own flesh. Peering obsessively into the real as well as metaphoric looking glasses that surround her, she desires literally to "reduce" her own body. In the nineteenth century . . . this desire to be beautiful and "frail" led to tight-lacing and vinegar-drinking. In our own era it has spawned innumerable diets and "controlled" fasts, as well as the extraordinary phenomenon of teenage anorexia. (Madwoman 54)

As if seen in a magic mirror, the reflection of the female self shifts almost imperceptibly from an image of beauty to one of horror, and often the woman herself, who is both the subject and the object of her own gaze, is unable to distinguish one from the other. This double image--the ideal and the deformed--is reflected in the physical body as well as in the imagination. The desire to conform to an externally imposed bodily form led women in the late nineteenth century to wear corsets designed to change their shapes, causing their internal organs to be deformed and, in some cases, permanently damaged. At the same time, the abstract ideal of female littleness could almost imperceptibly shift into a nightmare image of grotesque dwarfishness, for while the former was understood to be the physical form that best represented women whose social role was to serve as man's subordinate, the latter was seen as the image that most accurately portrayed the unmarried woman whose inability or refusal to fulfill her gendered role caused her life to be stunted. Gilman knew she could rely on a common stereotype when she described Mollie Mathewson as little and pretty. So did Kate Stephens when she described a spinster, in a 1901 Atlantic Monthly article on "The New England Woman," as a "dwarfed or distorted thing."

During her lifetime, Gilman was known primarily as an important American feminist theorist rather than as a writer of imaginative literature.¹⁴¹ During most of her life, she made her living and her reputation as a prolific writer and lecturer whose reputation in Europe as well as America was based on her provocative analyses of economic and political issues as they related to the lives of women. Her first important book, Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men

¹⁴¹ As a feminist, Gilman recognized the difficulty experienced by professional women whose names were derived from their fathers and husbands. At the end of her life, she wrote in her autobiography, "It would have saved trouble had I remained Perkins from the first, this changing of women's names is a nuisance we are now happily outgrowing" (284). Her case is more complicated than most because she married twice. Born Charlotte Anna Perkins, she changed her name to Charlotte Perkins Stetson when she married Walter Stetson at the age of twenty-four, kept that name after their divorce, and then changed her name again to Charlotte Perkins Gilman when she married Houghton Gilman at the age of forty. Today, she is almost universally referred to by the last of her names, Charlotte Perkins Gilman. For the most part, that is the name I use in the chapter. However, when it is appropriate or necessary for clarity, I refer to her given name or the name she used at the time of the events under discussion.

and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution, was published in 1898 when she was thirty-eight. According to Mary A. Hill, whose Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Making of a Radical Feminist, 1860-1896 (1980) was the first full-length study of Gilman, the book would be "translated into at least six languages, go through more than a half dozen printings, and serve as a 'Bible' for many suffragists and feminists for years" (4).¹⁴² One of those influenced by Gilman was Carrie Chapman Catt, a leader of the National American Woman Suffrage Association during the first two decades of the twentieth century, who ranked Gilman first on a list of the twelve greatest American women, and described her importance in the following words: "there was a period in the woman's movement when she brought out first one book then another . . . which were scientifically done and widely read by all classes of people. And I credit those books with utterly revolutionizing the attitude of mind in the entire country, indeed of other countries, as to woman's place." A similar tribute was made by Edith Houghton Hooker, who as national chairperson of the National Women's Party wrote in 1935, the year of Gilman's death, that she "probably made more Feminists among the generation now around 40 years old than any other person."¹⁴³

As Catt suggested, Gilman's influence was acquired through her prolific output of provocative books and essays. Women and Economics was followed by five other full-length books on children, religion, home, work, and male domination, plus hundreds of articles. Although some of these were published by the mainstream press, most originally appeared in her own journal, Forerunner, which she published from 1909 to 1916, reasoning that "[i]f the editors and publishers will not bring out my work, I will!" As she states in her autobiography, The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1935), she wrote every line of the monthly magazine herself: "ten-by-seven pages, twenty-eight of them, seven hundred and fifty words to a page, made some twenty-one thousand to the issue. It equalled four books a year" (304-5). Each issue included an installment of a novel and of a non-fiction book, a short

¹⁴² Other full-length studies are Gary Scharnhorst's Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1985) and Ann J. Lane's To Herland and Beyond: The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1990).

¹⁴³ Both of these statements, as well as others of a similar nature, are quoted by Larry Ceplair in his introduction to Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Nonfiction Reader (1991).

story, articles, poems, humor, book reviews, and comments on current events. For a time she even included advertisements which she wrote herself on products she happened to like. The magazine had around fifteen hundred subscribers, half the number needed to make its expenses. She made up the difference by income from her lectures, an activity she pursued most of her life.

Despite Gilman's visibility as a lecturer and writer, and her reputation as a creative thinker and social analyst, she was by choice and circumstances an outsider, never a member of either the intellectual or the literary establishments, and even remaining on the outskirts of the women's movement. Her nonfiction writings, although popular and influential, were written from an unorthodox point of view from a position outside the academy. Although her publications included poetry and fiction, and she was connected by birth with the lineage of nineteenth-century women writers--her great-aunt on her father's side was the renowned Harriet Beecher Stowe--Gilman herself seems to have known few of the important women writers of the nineteenth century. Living the first half of her life outside the cultural centers of Boston and New York City, and never being part of the Atlantic or Harpers rosters, she was isolated from the literary world that accepted Spofford, Davis, Phelps, and Freeman, among others, and even when she was settled in one place, her associations tended to be with socially and politically radical organizations and individuals.

Gilman's status during her lifetime as a literary outsider is evident when one looks for her name in the critical histories of American literature that began to be published after the first world war when the field was first becoming established as a legitimate subject for academic study. As I have already noted, these early studies tended to be more inclusive than those that followed the second world war, especially in their treatment of women writers. All of my other subjects were included in these early surveys as writers of importance and quality. However, I have found none which mention Gilman. It is as if she had written no fiction or poetry at all. There is only one exception. William Dean Howells, who was arguably the most influential literary figure of the late nineteenth century, selected "The Yellow Wallpaper," to be included among the twenty-four stories in his 1920

anthology, The Great American Stories.¹⁴⁴ Howells's decision to include a feminist whose literary works were virtually unknown among his selection of writers of great American stories was prophetic for ironically, of all the subjects in this study, Gilman is the one whose inclusion in the latest versions of the American literary canon has been most widely accepted. This has been due in large part to the same short fictional narrative, written near the beginning of her career, that so impressed Howells.¹⁴⁵

"The Yellow Wallpaper" was written in 1890 when Gilman was thirty years old. It is a devastating vision of madness and one of the most emotionally painful stories in American literature. It is also one of the most ambiguous. Up to that time, Gilman had published only a few poems and articles, and was still virtually unknown. One of these early works, however, a poem titled "Similar Cases" that had appeared in the April 1890 Nationalist, had been noticed by Howells who wrote her an encouraging letter. On the basis of this, Gilman sought his assistance when she had difficulty getting "The Yellow Wallpaper" published later that year. Howells liked the story and passed it on to his friend and successor at the Atlantic, Horace Scudder. Scudder, however, hated it. His rejection letter, which she later reprinted in her autobiography, said: "I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I have been made myself!" (119). The same Atlantic that under the successive editorship of Fields and Howells had welcomed numerous women writers into the literary fold on the basis of early and innovative

¹⁴⁴ Howells also included Spofford's "Circumstance" and Freeman's "The Revolt of 'Mother.'" Altogether, nine of the stories were written by women and fifteen by men.

¹⁴⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, in their pathbreaking work, The Madwoman in the Attic (1979), were among the first critics of our own time to place Gilman's story at the heart of the nineteenth century literary imagination and provide the rationale for its inclusion in the canon. They described "The Yellow Wallpaper" as "a striking story of female confinement and escape, a paradigmatic tale which (like Jane Eyre) seems to tell the story that all literary women would tell if they could speak their 'speechless woe'" (89). "The Yellow Wallpaper" has since been accepted as a paradigmatic text by critics as different as Judith Fetterley on the one hand and Walter Benn Michaels on the other. One of the characteristics of the story that have made it especially fertile ground for a variety of critical interpretations, both feminist and not, is its inherent self-reflexivity. In addition to extensive analyses in the full-length studies already cited, there has been a virtual explosion of interpretations of this single work during the past two decades, some of which have been collected in two casebooks: Catharine Golden, The Captive Imagination: A Casebook on The Yellow Wallpaper (1992) and Thomas L. Erskine and Connie L. Richards, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1993).

stories--Spofford and Davis thirty years earlier, followed by Phelps in the 1870's and Wilkins in the 1880's--now appeared to be too conservative to publish this one. In her autobiography, Gilman recalled that after further attempts, she finally gave the story to an agent who got it published in the January 1892 issue of New England Magazine then, according to Gilman, kept the forty dollar payment (119). Howells later took credit himself, writing in the introduction to his anthology that "I could not rest until I had corrupted the editor of The New England Magazine into publishing it" (vii).

Gilman's comment on Scudder's peculiar rejection note was to take it as confirmation that she had achieved her intent. "This was funny," she wrote in her autobiography. "The story was meant to be dreadful, and it succeeded. I suppose he would have sent back one of Poe's on the same ground" (119). This reference to Poe is fitting, for the story is certainly influenced by his work. But the extraordinary power of "The Yellow Wallpaper" comes not just from its Gothic or Poe-esque elements but from the reader's sense that the story is "real," that it portrays the "truth" of its author's experience. If it had been possible to read Gilman's story simply as a Gothic fantasy, it would not have been, as Howells also wrote in his introduction, "too wholly dire . . . too terribly good to be printed" (vii). Most readers agree that the story is so dire and so good because its origins are so deeply embedded in its author's emotional life. Because of this, "The Yellow Wallpaper" has demanded and received readings that are informed by biographical material.

Gilman handed her readers the biographical key to the text on two occasions when she described the personal circumstances which she claimed inspired the story. The first was in an article written for the Forerunner in 1913 titled "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" and the second was in chapters VIII and IX of her autobiography in which she described the severe nervous breakdown she experienced after the birth of her daughter and the devastating treatment she received from the most famous physician of nervous disorders of her time. As she put it in her autobiography: "The Yellow Wallpaper . . . is a description of a case of nervous breakdown beginning something as mine did, and treated as Dr. S. Weir Mitchell treated me with what I considered the inevitable result, progressive insanity" (118-

19). She wrote the story, according to her Forerunner article, in celebration of her escape from madness and to save other people from being subjected to the same treatment that had been inflicted upon her. Supported by these texts, nearly every interpretation of "The Yellow Wallpaper" has relied upon Gilman's own version of the story's biographical roots to explain its power and to decipher its meaning.

It would be presumptuous to totally dismiss the statements of a writer who reveals the connection between her life and her fiction as directly and unequivocally as Gilman has. But it would be naive to take her own interpretations of her motives and meanings as the final word on the matter. I have no doubt that Gilman was being honest when she claimed that she wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" out of her personal experience with mental breakdown and the unsuccessful treatment prescribed by Mitchell in 1887. I want to argue, however, that this is not the whole story, that other events and emotions, some going back to her childhood and others taking place in California in 1890, at the same time the story was being written, are even more profoundly woven into her text, especially in the figure of the yellow wallpaper itself. These other events and their significance were, however, even more shameful to the author than her mental breakdown.¹⁴⁶

The biographical roots of "The Yellow Wallpaper" reach down into her earliest experiences. Gilman was born Charlotte Anna Perkins on July 3, 1860 in Hartford, Connecticut, to parents who, by her own account, provided her with very little love. Her father, Frederick Beecher Perkins, was a member of the renowned Beecher family but his own achievements seemed to fall short of the family standard. He attended Yale but failed to graduate, at least in part because of his tendency to lose his temper, which resulted in his assaulting one of his professors. He then studied law but never practiced. Eventually, he found a place for himself in the world of books. As Gilman described his work in her autobiography: "He read them, he wrote them, he edited them, he criticized them, he became a librarian and classified them" (4). Gilman's

¹⁴⁶ Much of what is known about Gilman's life comes from her autobiography, The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1935), completed during the last year of her life. Additional biographical material drawn mainly from her letters and diaries is found in the full-length studies of Gilman's works and life by Hill, Scharnhorst, and Lane.

mother, Mary Ann Fitch Westcott, also came from an old New England family. "Femininely attractive in the highest degree," as her daughter later wrote, she was courted by many before finally marrying Frederick Perkins when she was twenty-nine (7). After three children were born in three years, the last being Charlotte, Mary Perkins was told that she would die if she had another baby. Gilman wrote that her father left home shortly thereafter, suggesting that his reasons were sexual. As she was growing up, he returned only for occasional visits and provided little in the way of either financial or emotional support. In her words, "he was a stranger, distant and little known. The word Father, in the sense of love, care, one to go to in trouble, means nothing to me." (5).

Left to raise two children alone (the first had died in infancy), Mary Perkins appears through the eyes of her daughter to have been a lonely, bitter, and emotionally repressed woman who never stopped loving the husband who had deserted her. As Gilman describes her, she was the epitome of the Victorian ideal of true womanhood gone bad. Given the difficulty of her circumstances, the weakness, dependency, and passivity of the assigned feminine character caused her and her children nothing but unhappiness. Her life was, her daughter later wrote, "one of the most painfully thwarted I have ever known" (8). Constantly fleeing poverty, the family moved nineteen times in eighteen years. Sometimes they lived with relatives in Hartford or in the country. For awhile they were members of a communal home of Swedenborgians in Providence. Always they relied on hand-me-down clothes and simple food. Gilman's mother did manage to provide her with a decent although unorthodox education over the years. She spent some years in public school, and at other times was instructed by her mother who occasionally ran her own little school for her two children and a few others. But the most powerful lesson Mary Perkins inflicted on her daughter was her remedy for emotional pain. As Gilman wrote in her autobiography:

Having suffered so deeply in her own list of early love affairs, and still suffering for lack of a husband's love, she heroically determined that her baby daughter should not so suffer if she could help it. Her method was to deny the child all expression of affection as far as possible, so that she should not be used to it or

long for it. 'I used to put away your little hand from my cheek when you were a nursing baby,' she told me in later years; 'I did not want you to suffer as I had suffered.' She would not let me caress her, and would not caress me, unless I was asleep. This I discovered at last, and then did my best to keep awake till she came to bed, even using pins to prevent dropping off, and sometimes succeeding. Then how carefully I pretended to be sound asleep, and how rapturously I enjoyed being gathered into her arms, held close and kissed. (10-11)

Each of Gilman's parents, in their own way, provided a model of how not to live that she had difficulty not following. Nevertheless, Charlotte Perkins tried to be as unlike her mother as possible, both emotionally and physically. An early lesson was her discovery of the power of her own will when she realized that no one "could make me do anything. One could suffer, one could die if it came to that, but one could not be coerced" (Living 34). Following her own course, she successfully overpowered her mother's opposition when she decided to attend the Rhode Island School of Design in preparation for becoming an artist. Around the same time, she also developed a passion for physical culture. Unlike her mother, who had the requisite petite and frail body of a "true woman", Charlotte was unusually tall and athletic, and she was determined to develop her physique. When she found that exercising and walking two miles a day was insufficient to reach her goals, she convinced one of her teachers to open a gymnasium for women which she attended for the next three years. She describes her physical regimen in her autobiography: "Going twice a week [to the gymnasium], each day I ran a mile, not for speed but wind, and can still run better than many a younger woman. I could vault and jump, go up a knotted rope, walk on my hands under a ladder, kick as high as my head, and revel in the flying rings" (Living 67). Needless to say, she never wore a corset or shoes she could not walk in comfortably.

At the same time she was developing a sense of rebellion and independence, Charlotte was seeking love from other girls to replace what she missed from both her parents. She recalled in her autobiography conceiving "a devoted affection for a schoolmate, a pale, long-haired Sunday-

schoolish child" (18) and later developing her "second devout affection" for a girl living in the Swedenborgian home, apparently older than herself, to whom she expressed her love by "giving her what I best loved, my three chiefest treasures, a garnet ring, a gold cross, an old mother-of-pearl cardcase--the only lovely, precious things I had" (26). As she grew older, her affections became even more intense. One year, she sent fifteen valentines to "charming May Diman, a few carefully arranged so that she would attribute them to me, the others written to seem as if from different men she knew, and had them copied by various friends and mailed to her from afar" (54).

When she was seventeen, Gilman developed one of her closest and most lasting friendships with sixteen-year-old Martha Luther.¹⁴⁷ In her autobiography, Gilman recalled telling her new friend at the outset: "We seem to be on the brink of what they call 'A schoolgirl friendship,' which so often breaks up in foolish quarrel or misunderstanding. Let's make ours safe and permanent" (48). The friendship thrived and four years later, in spring 1881, they exchanged bracelets, as a "badge, ornament, bond of amour," prior to Martha's departure for the summer (Hill 68). While they were separated, their letters expressed and intensified an attachment that had been growing increasingly serious and passionate. Although Martha's letters have been lost, Gilman's are available to reveal the nature of her feelings.

Written during a time when both young women were being courted by men, one recurrent topic had to do with the possibility of marriage. Yet, for Charlotte, at least, her principle desires were focused on Martha. Her letters are filled with baby-talk, references to emotional and physical "cuddlings," and appeals that her affections be reciprocated. "Fancy me strong and unassailable to all the world beside, and then coming down and truckling to you like a half-fed amiable kitten," she wrote on her twenty-first birthday (Lane 72). These verbal demonstrations of affection might be seen as evidence that Charlotte and Martha shared the kind of romantic friendship described by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg that was relatively common between young women in nineteenth-century America and that was, according to her

¹⁴⁷ Both Hill and Lane have emphasized the importance of Gilman's relationship with Martha Luther by devoting entire chapters to her.

findings, generally perceived as “normal.” However, as I have noted previously in this study, attitudes towards same sex relationships were already changing during the 1880’s and 1890’s, and even the term “schoolgirl friendship” had begun to take on more complex meanings than had been the case with an earlier generation and to assume a slight taint of the pathological. These attitudes are reflected in a popular book by Dr. Mary Wood-Allen, What A Young Woman Ought To Know (1899). In her advice to her readers (and their parents), Dr. Wood-Allen warned:

When girls are so sentimentally fond of each other that they are like silly lovers when together, and weep over each other’s absence in uncontrollable agony, the conditions are serious enough for the consultation of a physician. It is an abnormal state of affairs, and if probed thoroughly might be found to be a sort of perversion, a sex mania, needing immediate and perhaps severe measures. (177-78)

Gilman’s letters to Martha suggest that she was aware that her feelings might have gone over the line of social acceptability. In August she wrote: “If I am not ashamed of having sentiments I am not ashamed of admitting them” (Lane 73) and in another she added, as if thinking about the response future readers might have: “Incidental thought, wouldn’t these letters of mine be nuts for commentators! If & if of course, but how they would squabble over indistinct references and possible meanings!” (Hill 67). Two days after that she again expressed a recognition that the feelings between them did not fit accepted social definitions:

I think it highly probable (ahem!) that you love me however I squirm, love the steady care around which I so variously revolve, love me and will love me--why in the name of heaven have we so confounded love with passion that it sounds to our century-tutored ears either wicked or absurd to name it between women? It is no longer friendship between us, it is love. Why I feel it in me to be the friend of thousands, but you--! . . . Why I never imagined in my wildest dreams such a heaven as this, it can’t last. (Hill 83-4)

There were good reasons why Gilman's thoughts turned to the future. In lengthy serious debates about the future possibilities of marriage and family life, she had concluded that she was not only temperamentally unsuited to be married to a man but that she wanted to spend her life with Martha. Even when she became aware that Martha was seriously considering accepting the proposal of one of her suitors, she fantasized a devious way to still have a life together:

we live in our big house, you & I, and by the way, I have settled your business finally. You are to marry, of course, you would never be satisfied if you didn't, and after a certain period of unmerited, his, happiness, your young man is to drop off, die somehow, and lo! I will be all and all! (Hill 86)

But Martha did marry late that year, and her husband failed to "drop off." Charlotte was devastated. Her anguish is clear in her journals and letters, expressing her pain and begging Martha to return to her. When she wrote at the end of her life about this loss of her first love, she self-consciously renounced any suggestion of a sexual element, but the pain she felt over forty years earlier can still be felt:

Four years of satisfying happiness with Martha, then she married and moved away. In our perfect concord there was no Freudian taint, but peace of mind, understanding, comfort, deep affection--and I had no one else.

My Mother and her half-sister, with whom I lived, were unutterably remote--alien--and out of hearing. So were the other people I knew. "Why she's still your friend, isn't she?" they said. Of course she was--but she was gone. It was the keenest, the hardest, the most lasting pain I had yet known. There was no appreciation or sympathy anywhere. (Living 80)

Martha Luther married in October 1881, becoming Martha Lane. In her journals, Gilman expressed her resolution to live alone. Then in January 1882, she met Charles Walter Stetson, a twenty-four year old self-taught artist. Charlotte, who was herself studying to be an artist, felt she had found a

kindred spirit. She wrote in her autobiography that "in courage, in aspiration, in ideals, in bitter loneliness, we were enough alike to be drawn together" (82). He soon proposed and she immediately declined but then decided to leave the matter open. Walter courted her with persistence and for nearly two years she struggled to decide what to do, pulled between her needs for love and independence, unable to imagine how she might be able to have both. Moreover, she felt a conflict between married life that was seen by the world as "normal and right in general" and her own nature that knew that such a life was "not right" for her (Living 83). The two years of courtship were terrible for her and marked the onset of her serious depressions. It was only after Walter suffered a personal disappointment (ironically, the rejection of several of his sonnets by the Atlantic) that she agreed to marry him in May 1884. She claims in her autobiography that they "were really very happy together," except that her depressions became increasingly worse (87). When, she gave birth to their only child, Katharine, less than a year after the marriage, her psychological condition became unbearable.

In a chapter titled "The Breakdown" in her autobiography, Gilman describes her feelings as a victim of depression using the language of deformity: "A constant dragging weariness miles below zero. Absolute incapacity. Absolute misery. To the spirit it was as if one were an armless, legless, eyeless, voiceless cripple" (91). In her attempt to turn herself into a "normal" or "true" woman by becoming a wife and mother, Gilman's sense of her physical body was transformed in her distressed mind from an image of wholeness and health to one of senselessness and deformity. As much as she had tried to live a life that had no resemblance to her mother's, she too became a parody of true womanhood.

When her condition failed to improve, Gilman weaned her baby and on her doctor's advice accepted the invitation of a close girlhood friend, Grace Ellery Channing, to spend the winter of 1885 in Pasadena, California. On her way, she stopped in Utah to visit her brother and in San Francisco to see her father, who was now director of the public library. Her recovery in California appeared to be quick and complete; soon she and Grace were writing plays together and putting on theatricals, and she resumed painting. After a few months, she returned home but she regressed again so seriously that in

desperation she went to the most famous nerve specialist in the country, S. Weir Mitchell of Philadelphia, to try his "rest cure." As she recounts in detail in her autobiography, the cure not only failed to work, but it left her worse off than before, and when she returned home again she was afraid she would lose her mind completely. Realizing that she could be of no use to either her husband or her child if she were insane, she and Walter agreed in fall 1887 on a permanent separation. Charlotte sold some family property to enable her to move to Pasadena where she could be close to Grace and the Channing family. Grace came back east and the two women spent the summer on the Rhode Island shore before leaving on October 8, 1888 for Pasadena, accompanied by the three-year old Katharine. There she rented a small house near the Channings. Once settled, Charlotte once again flourished, as she had during her earlier visit. During the first year she wrote, according to her own account, "some thirty-three articles and twenty-three poems, besides ten more child-verses" (*Living* 111). In addition to receiving modest fees for her writing, she supported herself and her daughter by lecturing and giving lessons on various subjects. For fun, Charlotte and Grace once again wrote and acted in plays together with titles like "A Pretty Idiot."

But things were not completely peaceful. Walter had been writing two or three times a week and in December 1888, just a few months after Charlotte settled in California, he arrived in Pasadena in person, seeking reconciliation. Although Gilman is not completely clear in her autobiography on who lived where, it appears that Walter moved in with her and Katharine, while the Channings offered him studio space in their home and the two families took their meals together. Walter stayed in Pasadena for an entire year and while Charlotte resisted reconciliation, he and Grace became increasingly intimate. Initially, this must have been a relief for Charlotte. In March 1889, she reported to Martha Lane that Walter and Grace "are great friends, which gives me sincere delight" (Lane 148). Then in January 1890, a year after he arrived, Walter was forced to return to Rhode Island, due to the death of his mother. Nine months later, Grace also departed, apparently to be with Walter.

Gilman's letters and diaries from this period reveal a woman who was understandably in a state of emotional turmoil as she struggled to make sense of her loves and losses. It appears that as she became increasingly aware of her

feelings for Grace, she began to think more and more about her earlier love for Martha. In a long letter written to Martha on January 20, 1890 we get a glimpse of Gilman's state of mind before writing "The Yellow Wallpaper":

I haven't any heart but a scar; and I get nothing out of it by patient application but pathetic and agonized squirms. So I will hide the thing away again, in the cavity where it rattles about and hurts itself as I go on my path. Thank goodness it doesn't shriek and tear round as it used to!

You knew and loved me once. You do not know me now, and I am not at all sure that you would love me if you did. What you cling to so tenderly is a sweet memory, a lovely past; as many a man or woman cherishes a lost love.

Time and experience make us grow and change, in varying degree; . . . I have grown and changed wildly, darkly, strangely beyond a mother's recognition, beyond my own. The girl you knew, the woman you loved died some years past, died in long slow unutterable pain.

I believe you had some knowledge of it at the time. . . .

But this I will say of my love for you. Through the first year or two of my marriage, in every depth of pain and loss and loneliness, yours was the name my heart cried--not his. I loved you better than any one, in those days when I had a heart to love and ache. . . .

Grace Channing saved what there is of me. Grace Channing pulled me out of living death, set me on my staggering feet, helped me to get to work again, did more than I can say to make me live, and I love her, I think, as well as any one on earth. But it is different. With you I was happy, and that is a word I have forgotten. Those years with you, that blessed summer of eighty one--I doubt if most people have as much happiness in all their lives as I had then. I do not forget. But neither do I remember because it hurts. . . .

You do not understand. Unless we could live together again, or indeed if I wrote daily and vitalized each letter with my present self, we can come to no contact whatever. Write so I cannot. Meet we cannot, now. But time may turn the wheel to our old gladness again--"When you and I asked nothing of the world but room and one another!" (Hill 161-62)

When Grace returned to the East in September in order to be with Walter, Charlotte was left feeling more rejected and despondent than she had anticipated. On December 3, she wrote a letter to Grace that is similar in language and feeling to the one she had written to Martha:

Do you know I think I suffer more in giving you up than in Walter--for you were all joy to me. And it was not till things were well underway that that side of the arrangement dawned on me. I know I was gradually getting very near to you, and now that dreadful angel has come and swallowed you and I am nowhere! It is awful to be a man inside and not able to marry the woman you love! When Martha married it cracked my heart a good deal--your loss will finish it. . . .

I think of you with a great howlin' selfish heartache. I want you--I love you--I need you myself! How's that for a "virtue." (Lane 150)

All the pain and loneliness that Charlotte had felt when Martha Luther had abandoned her to marry Charles Lane nine years before were rekindled and intensified in 1890 when Grace Channing left her for a man. Only this time her rival was no stranger, but her own estranged husband.

The exact dates of the composition of "The Yellow Wallpaper" are hard to pinpoint but it clearly was written while the events I have been describing were going on. The first draft was probably written during the spring of 1890. According to Gilman's manuscript log, she mailed the story to Scribner's on June 17. In a letter to Martha dated July 27, Gilman referred to "my awful story 'The Yellow Wall-paper'" and noted that Walter had read it four times and "thinks it the most ghastly tale he ever read" (Hill 186). However, she

must have continued to work on the story for at least another month, for she refers in her diary of September 1 to finishing a draft two days before. This date matches her manuscript log which notes that she sent a copy of the manuscript to Howells on August 28. In the same September 1 diary entry Gilman records that an "overdose of acid phosphate gives terror," indicating that she was still taking medication for her depression (Hill 186). Significantly, it was on September 4 when Charlotte wrote to Martha: "Grace has left me" (Hill 186).

Every critic who has examined the entire body of Gilman's fiction has agreed that none of her other stories come near "The Yellow Wallpaper" in the brilliance of its writing or in the power of its emotional impact. Nearly everyone, following Gilman's own lead, attributes this to the specific biographical circumstances that she claimed inspired it: her experiences with nervous disorder and the treatment she received from S. Weir Mitchell in 1887. Most have completely ignored the anguish she was experiencing at the very time she was writing it, just as Gilman herself passed over this period in her autobiographical account of the story's origins.¹⁴⁸ Yet, it is difficult to imagine a more emotionally fraught and complex situation than the triangular relationship that existed in 1890, and it is impossible to believe that this situation did not have an impact on the intensely personal story she was writing. The immense pain that lies beneath the surface of the narrative, the self-loathing that seems to pervade it, the anger that is scarcely disguised by a narrative tone that is at once self-pitying, bitter, and sarcastic are, I suggest, related to the personal events that were going on in Gilman's life as she was writing "The Yellow Wallpaper." The intensity of her passions and her attempts to conceal them created a subtext that gives the story its tremendous power and makes it difficult to interpret.

The fictional location of this subtext is the central image of the story, the yellow wallpaper. The story's "plot," to the extent that there is a plot, has

¹⁴⁸ Gilman notes Stetson's arrival to attempt a reconciliation and then in a later chapter she notes Grace's marriage to him, but there is no account, of her feelings about these events as there had been regarding Martha Luther's marriage. It is possible that the reason for this reticence lies in the relationship she had with Grace and with her daughter Katharine at the time she was writing the autobiography and her efforts to protect their feelings.

to do with the narrator's attempts to correctly interpret the hidden meaning of the wallpaper. This interpretive act has also been the focus of most readers of the past two decades.¹⁴⁹ This wallpaper text is about nothing if not deformity. But Gilman's story is unlike any of the others I have examined in this study. The deformed figure is not introduced as either a major or a secondary character in the story, but gradually takes its form as the story progresses. At the beginning of the story, the wallpaper appears as a flat, two-dimensional abstract pattern, a mere "mural decoration," lacking any specific meaning or representation. In the course of the narrative, it is transformed by the narrator's imagination, first into a series of static images of deformity, then into animated ones which eventually emerge from the wallpaper to take the form of a three-dimensional deformed woman who in the end merges with the body of the narrator. This shift occurs as the narrator's reality shifts from the outside world into the room she occupies and ultimately into her own mind. It is as if Gilman were describing the creative process that produces the figure of the deformed woman and, in doing so, were making visible the relationship between the writer's imagination and the fictional characters she creates. It is as if she were showing us, in effect, how the deformed figure got into a work like Spofford's "Her Story," where she appears only at the very end of the narrative. Although Spofford described her deformed woman in language that carries a weight of symbolic significance so heavy that it insists upon its own importance, she leaves it up to the reader to determine the nature of that significance. In Gilman's text, although the deformed figure initially occupies a marginal and insignificant space, it is the narrator rather than the reader who causes it to move into a central position in both her own consciousness and in the text she produces, so that instead of remaining at the margins of the plot, its creation is the plot.

¹⁴⁹ Following the lead of Gilbert and Gubar, feminist critics of the early 1980's have tended to read Gilman's work as a story of women's empowerment, painfully acquired through her control of language which enabled her to revise a patriarchal text. They have read "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a story of liberation through rebellion, even if that rebellion took the form of madness. More recent critics have questioned this optimistic interpretation. Some have challenged what they perceived as the essentialism of earlier critics who, "generalizing from the situation of one nineteenth-century woman, . . . read the story as 'the' woman's story, as having some essential 'female meaning'" (Golden 324). Many critics have observed that the story was created and has been largely interpreted from a white middle-class perspective that has missed its inherent racism. Others have rejected the suggestion that the story ends in empowerment, emphasizing the narrator's sexual repression and descent into madness.

Moreover, interpretation coexists with creation, so that the task of deciphering the meaning of the deformed figure in the story is not left to the reader alone but is undertaken by the narrator herself.

These simultaneous acts of creation and interpretation are reflected in the narrative form of the story which is told in the first-person by a narrator who shares an intimate and private relationship with the reader. From the outset, Gilman carefully establishes a series of related fictional illusions: first, that the narrator is writing her story in the form of a journal or, more plausibly, a series of letters; second, that this text is intended only for the eyes of the reader who is, in some unidentified way, understood to be in sympathy with the narrator; and third, that the reader is not only reading the words written for her but also is imaginatively observing the writing process itself. These illusions are carried by the written text with asides like: "There comes John, and I must put this away,--he hates to have me write a word" and "We have been here two weeks, and I haven't felt like writing before, since that first day" (26-27).¹⁵⁰ These written comments are reinforced by the first of three illustrations that appeared in the original magazine publication, showing the narrator sitting in a rocking chair in front of a window writing the text which is, presumably, the same one that is being read. The caption--"I am sitting by the Window in this Atrocious Nursery"--is another communication directly from the narrator to the reader, as if the letter writer had enclosed a snapshot of herself writing the letter it accompanied (27).

Even though this structure quickly breaks down as the narrator becomes more and more obsessed with the wallpaper, and loses control of her text, Gilman's choice to present her story in the form of an intimate and private communication between the narrator and the reader is significant. In doing so she evoked a slightly old-fashioned literary convention that had been widely used during the nineteenth century and that had been an especially attractive device for women writers. As I suggested in my reading of Spofford's "The Amber Gods" and "Her Story," the use of the first-person narrative by a woman writer has the effect of seeming to place full control of

¹⁵⁰ All page references are to Catharine Golden, The Captive Imagination, which includes a reprint of the 1899 edition published by Small, Maynard in Boston with the illustrations from the 1892 version published in New England Magazine.

the text firmly in the hands of the woman whose story is being told. By writing as one woman to another, a kind of female authority over the text is established that counters the more traditional authority of the omnipotent and omniscient male author and his offshoot, the male narrator. Moreover, because that authority is based on the private revelations of intimate truths, it is an especially suitable and natural literary form for nineteenth-century women whose primary social relations were based on the sharing of personal feelings through conversation and letters with other women. At the same time, by enclosing the story within the space occupied by the narrator and her reader/listener, the author herself disappears as a voice separate from the narrator's while the reader is given a presence in the text.¹⁵¹ The first-person narrative was an especially felicitous choice of structure for "The Yellow Wallpaper," for it allowed Gilman to take an apparently autobiographical stance that might or might not be completely or partially fictional while establishing a kind of conspiratorial pact with her readers which encourages us to view even the most delusional and paranoid experiences sympathetically. The decision to depict the narrator in the act of writing rather than speaking allowed Gilman to focus on the plight of the woman writer as much as on a woman's descent into madness.¹⁵² One of the reasons this theme is so clear is the power of the image of the narrator with a pen in her hand, furtively writing to the reader behind the back of her wrong-headed and domineering husband. This picture is so strong that it continues in the mind of the reader as a kind of ghost image even after both the writer and the reader have turned their attention to the "real" text, the yellow wallpaper, and the illusion of the written text is dropped.

As I have already noted, the most significant characteristic of the figures in the yellow wallpaper is their grotesque deformity. As soon as they

¹⁵¹ Here, as in the chapter on Spofford, I am indebted to the insights of Susan Sniader Lanser in Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice (1992).

¹⁵² There is also a more personal explanation for this structure. Writing was the form of personal communication that was most comfortable for Gilman. Not only did she keep a diary throughout her life, but many of her most important personal relationships were conducted primarily through written correspondence. It seems plausible to speculate that when she imagined sharing her deepest thoughts and feelings with a confidant, the most natural form it took was letters rather than conversation.

begin to emerge out of the inchoate pattern of the wallpaper, these figures are described as lame, deformed, and monstrous. During the first two sections of the story, while the narrator is portrayed as being still in control of her text, her comments are critical and objective, and her emphasis is almost exclusively on the wallpaper's aesthetic failings. The wallpaper has "one of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin," we are told; it is at once dull, pronounced, uncertain, with outrageous angles and contradictions (26). Even its color is dirty and repellent. As her obsession with the wallpaper intensifies, the illusion that the narrator is a writer in control of her text is gradually abandoned. At the same time, the reader's attention turns from the figure of the writing narrator to the figures she perceives within the wallpaper and we join her in her increasingly obsessed attempts to understand them. The pattern in the wallpaper becomes increasingly animate and indeterminate, changing from stable images to shape-shifting hallucinations that fade in and out of focus in seemingly endless combinations and confluences until, by the end of the story, the narrator has herself become totally merged with its nightmarish images.

When the narrator first begins to shift her focus from the general ugliness of the wallpaper to the details of its pattern, she sees a "a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down" (29). Various readers have observed that this imagery suggests a newborn infant and have accounted for this by noting the connection between Gilman's experience as a new mother and her bouts with debilitating depression. Indeed, it is impossible to read the description of the wallpaper pattern without thinking of Ellen Moers who first recognized in women's literature a "motif of revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences . . . a fantasy of the newborn as at once monstrous agent of destruction and piteous victim of parental abandonment" (93, 97). In her chapter, "The Female Gothic," Moers focused her critical analysis on the monster in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, but she also included a brief reference to "The Yellow Wallpaper," describing it as "Charlotte Perkins Gilman's macabre post-partum fantasy" (97). Given the timing of Gilman's own breakdown, following the birth of her only child, it seems reasonable to read the creeping image as representing, at least in part, a view of the infant as monster. She

herself encourages such a reading within the text, by giving her narrator a newborn infant for whom she is unable to adequately care, as well as in her autobiographical description of the circumstances surrounding her descent into depression. It is worth proposing, however, that this image of the monstrous infant also reflects back upon herself the pain she suffered during her own childhood as she struggled with her mother's unwillingness to permit any expression of affection. The self-reflective nature of the deformed figure is further suggested by Gilman's use of a similar image in her autobiography, when she described her depression as making her feel like "an armless, legless, eyeless, voiceless cripple" (91).

The configuration of the wallpaper's pattern as a series of grotesque crippled figures is not the only vision that appears in the wallpaper. Almost immediately, the narrator begins to perceive a second image, "a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design" (30), and soon she begins to read this figure behind the pattern as the more important. This background pattern is described as a repetition of numerous images of a single woman, sometimes coming in the window and at other times trying to escape from behind the pattern. At the same time as the figure behind the pattern moves into prominence, the outer pattern shifts, according to the light, creating a series of images that are even more violent and more repugnant than before.

The worst thing about the wallpaper's pattern, in fact, the thing that the narrator experiences as "torturing," is its failure to obey any natural principles of order. It is out of the norm, refusing to be understood by rational thought. "There is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law, that is a constant irritant to a normal mind" (34). It is this arrogant sense of defiant deviance that "slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you" (34). During the day, the images most often resemble monsters of various kinds: at one moment the pattern is likened to a malevolent clown in a carnival, a figure that conjures up a vision of grotesque dwarfs; at another it appears as a string of toadstools, suggesting an out-of-control subterranean fecundity. These images, to which the narrator is both attracted and repelled, embody her confused ambivalence towards her subject. At night, the pattern shifts again, becoming a series of prison bars that entrap the madwoman behind it who is

by day "subdued, quiet" (34). These images seem to contradict each other, leaving the narrator and the reader wondering which are the foreground, which the background, as the figures that are disobeying the rules also appear to be the jailors who enforce them.

As these grotesque figures begin to take form and the previously static design of the wallpaper is transformed into a shifting fantasy, the narrator's perceptions expand beyond the purely visual and aesthetic to include the more crude senses of smell and touch, and the wallpaper's yellow color and noxious smell become increasingly repugnant. Earlier in the narrative, when the narrator first had entered the room and noticed its wallpaper, she had described its color as "repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclear yellow" (26). Later on, this "hideous . . . infuriating" color seemed to literally rub off on the narrator and her husband in "yellow smooches" which are noticed, curiously, only by Jennie, her sister-in-law (35). As the wallpaper becomes increasingly animate and vegetative, the color becomes more repellent, reminding the narrator of "old foul, bad yellow things," while at the same time, the smell of yellow begins to "creep all over the house." At first, the smell is described as "not bad"--as gentle, subtle, enduring, but soon the narrator finds it so disturbing that she fantasizes burning the house to get rid of it (37).

Although neglected in early readings, recent critics have placed the color and smell of the wallpaper in the foreground of their interpretations, generally connecting it with female sexuality and reproduction.¹⁵³ The text itself does not specifically describe the smell, except to say that it is the smell of the color yellow. However, if we trace the story's literary lineage, we can connect the smell of the color yellow to another yellow smell, the mysteriously disturbing amber in Spofford's "The Amber Gods." The amber in Spofford's story evoked not only the sensuality and earthiness connected with Yone, but an earlier, primordial age ruled by passion and violence, in which the meaning of even life and death was reversed. In Spofford's words, the smell of the amber recalled "a furious epoch where rioted all monsters

¹⁵³ A useful summary of interpretations is found in Elaine R. Hedges, "'Out at Last'? 'The Yellow Wallpaper' after Two Decades of Feminist Criticism" (Golden 319-33).

and poisons,--where death fecundated and life destroyed" (55-56). It was a smell that stimulated men's passions, even those of the pallid and effete Vaughn Rose. It is a smell that is explicitly associated with the sexuality of women. Just as Spofford's description of the madwoman in "Her Story" may have been a source for Gilman's use of fungus to describe the pattern on the wallpaper, her description of the smell of amber may have been in Gilman's mind when she described the wallpaper's smell and, more importantly, she may have also been evoking a deep-seated conflict regarding female sexuality.¹⁵⁴

The narrator's response to the disturbing smell of the wallpaper when she tells us: "I thought seriously of burning the house--to reach the smell," also calls to mind another story in which a creeping madwoman burns her estranged husband's house. The distorted and grotesque figure of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, which Gilbert and Gubar have argued to be a paradigmatic figure within a tradition of women writers, may be one of the models for the figure in the wallpaper. Confined to the attic because her madness (that is, her unrestrained sexuality and "animal" nature) threatens her proper English husband, Bertha breaks out in a fit of jealousy when the more controlled, nurturing, and "little" Jane enters the house and wins Rochester's affections. Eventually, Bertha succeeds in burning the house down, killing herself and blinding Rochester in the process, and thus making it possible for Jane to return and marry him.

Just after expressing her desire to burn the house down, the narrator realizes that the women trapped in the wallpaper have been escaping. With this discovery, the narrator becomes gripped by an almost manic sense of excitement as she grows more determined to discover the secret encoded in the wallpaper. As she moves increasingly into its interior, the images become

¹⁵⁴ Gilman's imagery is close enough to Spofford's description of the mad woman with hair like fungus in "Her Story" to suggest that she too might have provided a model. Spofford was immensely popular and influential during the late nineteenth century, and Gilman would almost surely have known her writing although I have found no specific reference to her. She may even have had the title of "The Amber Gods" in mind, since hers has the same grammatical construction, with the colors amber and yellow as modifiers. (This construction often was used by Poe as well, an author whose influence both Spofford and Gilman acknowledged.)

more and more animated until they threaten to merge. The prison bars on the surface of the wallpaper that had been initially fixed have now come alive and are capable of strangling the woman (or women--the narrator is not sure whether there is one or many) attempting to climb through, making her eyes bulge white. At the same time, the woman behind the pattern has become strikingly similar to the crawling monster that had, at the beginning of the story, been part of the outside pattern. Soon the narrator herself begins to merge with what she had earlier perceived as the outside and inside images of the wallpaper as both become less grotesque designs than illusionary projections of her own state of mind. As "The Yellow Wallpaper" nears its climax, the narrator increasingly loses control even of her fantasies regarding the woman in the wallpaper until her role becomes that of a spy as she watches the woman escape, no longer just at night but now even in broad daylight, crawling out along the road under the trees. But instead of achieving any clarification from such intense observation, the meaning of the story seems more and more elusive. Who is escaping? What can the narrator mean when she says "John is so queer now, that I don't want to irritate him. I wish he would take another room! Besides, I don't want anybody to get that woman out at night but myself"? (38). Are we to believe that the escaping woman is simply a projection of the narrator herself? If so, why would she want to confine her? It would appear that a struggle is being waged between the narrator and John over the control of the woman in the wallpaper that is not explained in the text.

The sense that the narrator is a spy rather than a captive becomes even more pronounced in the short, penultimate section of the story, immediately after the narrator's observation that the woman in the wallpaper has escaped to creep along the road and to hide among the blackberry vines. The action in this section suddenly quiets and the narrator's attention turns to John and Jennie. At this moment, there is a strong sense that the real task facing the narrator is the reluctant discovery of a truth about others that those others want to keep hidden from her and the discovery of a truth about herself that she, in turn, wants to keep hidden from the others. The nature of those truths, the secrets behind the wallpaper, are not explicitly revealed in the text. In fact, the narrator teases us by confiding: "I have found out another funny thing, but I shan't tell it this time!" (39). This indeterminacy of the subject is

one of the reasons for the power of the story. The secrets in the wallpaper are never to be known for they are the narrator's secret and she has chosen not to reveal them.

The final section is dominated by mocking laughter. It begins by noting that John is staying in town and although "Jennie wanted to sleep with me," the narrator refuses what she interprets as a sly tactic to pacify her (39). That night, as the narrator struggles to free the woman trapped in the wallpaper, she feels that even the pattern is laughing at her. Then, it is Jennie, her sister-in-law, whose laughter of pretended understanding--upon seeing the torn wallpaper, "[s]he laughed and said she wouldn't mind doing it herself"--is interpreted by the narrator not as an expression of sisterhood but as a betrayal (39). This conversation with Jennie is so disturbing to the narrator that instead of being pacified, her anger intensifies and she becomes an enraged monster on her hands and knees, literally crippled by her anger, who chews the bedpost with rage. She says she is "getting angry enough to do something desperate" (40). She would jump out the window but is stopped not only by the bars but because she fears that such an act "is improper and might be misconstrued" (40). But what would be misconstrued, we might well ask, and why would the narrator care? By now, "all those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!" (40). What is causing this sense of being laughed at? Is this just a memory of post-partum depression?

By the end of the story, the narrator is the one who gets the last laugh as she finally merges completely with the lame, grotesque, and deformed woman in the wallpaper. In the final moment, the narrator has moved as far as possible from the woman we saw in the first section of the story, sedately seated by the window, writing to the reader and commenting on the ugly wallpaper in her room. All pretense of a written text is gone completely, as the narrator crawls over the body of her husband who has fainted dead away on seeing his wife regress into what appears to him to be total madness. Instead of quietly and secretly writing her thoughts, the narrator's words now ring with a triumph whose emotional force cannot be denied: "I've got out at last . . . in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you

can't put me back!" (42).¹⁵⁵ In some ways, the ending is a comical role reversal, with the once powerful male fainting like an hysterical Victorian lady and with the disingenuous surprise of the narrator echoing her husband's earlier condescending tone: "Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!" (42). But, despite her expression of victory, we cannot escape from the knowledge that the narrator has, herself, regressed into the state of the monster in the wallpaper. Or, put another way, she has become the character created by her own imagination.

Like other nineteenth-century narratives ending in acts of self-destruction, such as Kate Chopin's The Awakening and Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth, the ultimate interpretative question that must be faced is whether this final moment represents an act of triumph or of defeat for the female protagonist. Well-reasoned arguments have been made on both sides of the question, but the many ambiguities and unanswered questions located in the text ultimately frustrate our attempts to reach a definitive interpretation. I would argue that the roots of the "undecidability" of this always enigmatic text are found in the events that were going on in Gilman's life while she was writing "The Yellow Wallpaper." The narrator's emphasis on secrecy and her hints of possessing hidden knowledge that is never revealed reflect Gilman's struggles to come to terms with her own secret feelings and her growing awareness of the secrets of others. The rage that increasingly possesses the narrator emerges not only from Gilman's unresolved feelings towards her dependent child and her inadequate mother, but more immediately from her unexpressed anger with the nurturing, maternal Grace, who was about to abandon her to join Walter as she was writing this story. The narrator's triumphant revenge upon the fallen John,

¹⁵⁵ Many critics have assumed that "Jane" is either a misprint for "Jennie" or an alternate version of the same name. A misprint seems unlikely and while it is true that "Jennie" is a nickname for "Jane," this does not account for why the narrator suddenly makes this shift. Others have assumed that Jane is the name of the narrator and have interpreted this passage as an expression that the deformed woman in the wallpaper has taken over the narrator's body so that even if she wanted her sanity back, she could not force the freed demon back behind the wallpaper. Another possible explanation is that Gilman chose, in the final moment of the story, to suggest a kinship between the narrator's "sister-in-law" and the intruding rival in Brontë's novel, *Jane Eyre*, and thereby to more clearly make the connection between her narrator and Bertha.

which she achieves only by simultaneously locking herself up in madness and confinement, reflects Gilman's confused response to her own frustration and rage as she watched her husband win over the affection of the woman whose love she herself desperately needed. Finally, the puzzling aura of self-loathing that permeates the text as potently as the smell of yellow permeates the house, suggest a revulsion against female sexuality that resulted from Gilman's increasing awareness of the nature of her feelings for Grace and her earlier love for Martha, feelings which she understood to be "unnatural," but which she was unable to completely repress. Gilman's personal writings all confirm that she was a woman who had a profound need to be loved but who had learned to deny her desires in the face of emotional disappointments. But powerful emotions simply cannot be made to disappear, even by the strongest will, and it was the violence of Gilman's own not easily repressed feelings which was at least partly responsible for the unresolved emotional complexity of "The Yellow Wallpaper." Because of the conflicting nature of the biographical events taking place while the story was being written, it ends in both triumph and defeat, and therefore is neither. If a message is to be taken from the story, it is the difficulty and complexity of understanding and coping with painful emotional realities that are too dangerous to be spoken out loud. Gilman's text, like the wallpaper itself, has no objective meaning that can be deciphered like a code; it twists and turns in ways that do not fit any known aesthetic rule, yet it embodies powerful and irrepressible emotions.

Although it was written in 1890, "The Yellow Wallpaper" was not published until January 1892.¹⁵⁶ By that time, Grace had been gone for over a year, Charlotte knew of her plans to marry Walter as soon as a divorce was final, and Charlotte had moved to Oakland to live with another woman. On May 11, 1891, six months after Grace left California to join Walter, Charlotte met Adeline E. Knapp, a young journalist, while she was on a lecture tour in

¹⁵⁶ Because the story appeared in volume 5, no. 5 of New England Magazine, many critics assume that 5 refers to May and date the publication as May 1892. However, Catharine Golden makes an excellent case for January 1892 as the correct issue (Golden 19 n. 1). Gilman confused matters by giving May 1891 in her autobiography (119), and Lane repeats this error in her study (124).

the San Francisco area.¹⁵⁷ Their relationship intensified rapidly. Ten days after they met, Gilman wrote in her journal, "I love her . . . feel better--thanks to Miss Knapp." Two days after that, Gilman notes that Miss Knapp "stays here all night" and by June she describes them as "very happy together." After she returned to Pasadena, Gilman and Knapp--now affectionately referred to as "Delle," "my girl," and "Delight"--corresponded daily and Knapp came to Pasadena to visit in mid-July. Shortly after the visit, Knapp sent Gilman fifty dollars to move herself and Katharine from Pasadena to Oakland. In her autobiography, Gilman notes the move and quotes, without further explanation of her motives or her feelings, the following excerpt from her diary:

"On Friday, Sept. 18, I came here to live with Dora [I will call this new friend Dora, which is not her name.] Mother is with me also, and Katharine, of course. The pleasure in the new relation is that I now have some one to love me, and whom I love [This meant Dora]. It is a Home!" (133; explanatory brackets are Gilman's)

Gilman had high hopes for the success of this relationship. It must have seemed that at last she had found a woman who had no inclination to leave her for a man and with whom she could form a lasting, intimate, emotional relationship.

The relationship turned out to be difficult, however, and this time it was Gilman who sought to end it less than two years after she moved to Oakland. Many factors may have contributed to Gilman's difficulties during this period, not the least of which were the presence of her daughter, who was six when they moved, and her mother, Mary Perkins, who was terminally ill and had come West to live with Gilman. To make matters worse, the four of them lived in grueling poverty, running a boarding house for extra money, with Charlotte and Delle in one room, and Katharine and Mary sharing another. There were also social pressures. Walter sued for divorce in December 1892, but although he and Charlotte had agreed to cooperatively

¹⁵⁷ Information on the relationship between Gilman and Knapp is taken from Hill, chapter nine, and Lane, chapter seven, as well as from Gilman's autobiography.

dissolve their marriage, avoiding unnecessary accusations, the matter was picked up by the press which proceeded to attack and ridicule Charlotte for violating the social code, holding her up as an example of female deviance in articles with headlines like "Should Literary Women Marry." As Gilman put it in her autobiography: "My name became a football for all the papers on the coast" (143). Through all of this, she was trying to cope with the physical and emotional stress of taking care of her dying mother.

However, as Gilman wrote in her autobiography: "Harder than everything else was the utter loss of the friend with whom I had sincerely hoped to live continually." According to her account, the relationship failed because of Knapp's immoral character:

The kindest thing I can say of her character is that she had had an abscess at the base of the brain, and perhaps it had affected her moral sense. I do not mean to describe her as "immoral" in its usual meaning; she was malevolent. She lied so freely as to contradict herself in the course of a conversation, apparently not knowing it. She drank--I saw her drunk at my table. She swore freely, at me as well as others. She lifted her hand to strike me in one of her tempers, but that was a small matter. What did matter was the subtle spreading of slanders about me . . . At any rate that solace ended not only in pain but in shame--that I should have been so gullible, so ignorant, as to love her dearly. (143-44)

For a time, Charlotte was helped and comforted by another boarder, Harriet Howe, especially while Delle was away on a long assignment to Hawaii, but this relationship also exacerbated the tension between her and Delle who was jealously possessive.¹⁵⁸ In March 1893, Gilman's mother died. Delle finally moved out in July. In her yearly summation on December 31, 1893, Gilman wrote: "My last love proves even as the others" (Lane 175). By 1894, she was alone: her relationship with Delle had ended, her mother had died, and she

¹⁵⁸ The precise nature of these relationships can never be clear but Gilman did make a practice of noting in her diary who she slept with, including casual acquaintances. During this period, it was both Harriet and Delle.

had sent Katharine back to Rhode Island to live with Walter and Grace who were now married.

After Katharine left, Gilman agreed to edit the Impress, the journal of the Pacific Coast Women's Press Association, and moved into the home of Helen Campbell and Paul Tyner in San Francisco. When the journal went bankrupt, Gilman accepted an invitation from Jane Addams to spend a few months in Chicago. She then went on the road as an itinerant lecturer for the next five years, travelling throughout the United States and England. In 1897, she became reacquainted with George Houghton Gilman, a favorite younger cousin from her childhood who was now a Wall Street lawyer. During the next three years while Charlotte continued to lecture all over the country, their relationship flourished primarily through letters--prolific letters of eight to ten pages, usually written every day, sometimes more often. In 1900, when she was forty and he thirty-three, they married and settled on the upper west side of New York City. As noted earlier, she published her own magazine, The Forerunner, from 1909 to 1916. She was a member of various political and social organizations, and was one of twenty-five women who organized the radical Heterodoxy Club in 1912.¹⁵⁹ Always, she continued her lectures. In 1922, Charlotte and Houghton moved to Norwich, Connecticut. In 1934, Houghton died and Charlotte, who had been diagnosed with untreatable breast cancer in 1932, moved to Pasadena to be near her daughter and her two grandchildren. When she realized her cancer had advanced to the final stages, she asked Grace, who also was now a widow, to come live with her and she did. Ever since her mother's slow and painful death, Charlotte had determined to take her own life rather than put herself or those near her through needless suffering. On August 17, 1935, after making the final corrections on the proofs of her autobiography, she ended her life, writing that "I have preferred chloroform to cancer" (Living 335).

Biographers have been puzzled about how to characterize Gilman's personal relationships, especially those with women, given the clear

¹⁵⁹ The Heterodoxy Club was a luncheon club based in Greenwich Village, dedicated to a wide range of social and political opinions. Its members included open lesbians and advocates of free love, as well as women who were married. Mabel Dodge Luhan, another member, said in her autobiography that it was for "women who did things and did them openly" (Lane 333).

differences between nineteenth- and twentieth-century conceptions of sexuality. They have been especially reluctant to label her a lesbian, primarily because she so adamantly resisted that label herself. In her autobiography, for example, she was very careful to describe her feelings for Martha as having been those of "love, but not sex" (78) and of having "no Freudian taint" (80). Moreover, in her political writings, she was stridently committed to the principle of heterosexual monogamy. E. A. Ross recalled in his autobiography that Gilman once told him: "I am altogether heterosexual and cannot do my best work unless in love and loved" (Lane 349). These kinds of statements seem to contradict the realities of her life, as revealed in her diaries and even in her autobiography.

The answer to this apparent puzzle can only be found, I think, in the changing definitions of sexual and gender behavior that were held around the turn of the century and into the twentieth century. Gilman lived during a period when the conception of the nature of female sexual deviance was changing from that of sexual inversion to that of lesbianism. As a feminist theorist who lived a life that was unconventional by any standard, Gilman was very aware of these changes, not only as shifts in the intellectual ideas of her time, but as they personally affected her.

Even as a girl and young woman, she saw herself as a deviant according to the theories of inversion that were commonly held during the 1880's. As we have already seen, a sometimes playful and often painful sense of her inherent abnormality is clear when she describes herself as being a man in a woman's body in her love letters to Martha Luther. This sense of herself as having a masculine nature was also one of the principle reasons why she resisted marriage to Stetson. In addition to fearing that she would be unable to achieve her worldly ambitions while assuming the duties of a wife and mother, she was also struck by a horrifying sense of her own deviance which was occasionally expressed in images that anticipate the deformed shapes that were to haunt the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper." In 1882, for example, when she was being courted by Stetson and struggling to decide whether or not to marry, she wrote that the relationship made her feel "not a woman" but "maimed, warped, imperfect" (Lane 89). Stetson, on the other hand, being on the male side of the social equation, felt his own masculinity swell

whenever Charlotte appeared most vulnerable. A telling entry in his diary reveals his adaption of socially dominant attitudes which found women most attractive when they were most vulnerable as he reacts to seeing Charlotte immobilized after a gym accident: "lying on the lounge . . . looking a little like an invalid, but more womanly than ever" (Lane 93). On a later occasion, when she had been unable to compete with Walter for the love of Grace, we recall her painful words, echoing those she had earlier written to Martha: "It is awful to be a man inside and not able to marry the woman you love!" (Lane 150). Later, when to the shocked horror of American society, Charlotte committed the monstrous act of sending her six-year-old daughter, Katharine, to be raised by Walter and Grace, she expressed both her own abnormality as a mother and her inappropriate feelings for Grace by assuming the role of the absent father, addressing her letters to the "dear Mother of my child" (Lane 153).

The nineteenth-century perception that women with "masculine" traits were invert was not limited to those women who expressed emotional and sexual desire for other women. Newspaper articles covering the divorce suit brought by Walter against Charlotte titillated their audiences with innuendo, such as the following account from the San Francisco Examiner of December 19, 1892: "

He [Walter] said she followed gymnastics until she became very muscular. G. Walt is not a muscular man, and somewhat undersized, so his complaint seemed to hint that his wife was rather the head of the household before she picked up her dress reform duds, her Bellamy writings and her muscular development and put off for California. . . . (Hill 197)

George Chauncey, Jr. cites an article titled "Effeminate Men and Masculine Women" published in 1900 by a medical doctor who wrote numerous popular books on sex during the early twentieth century, which expresses the common attitudes towards unwomanly women: "William Lee Howard . . . warned that feminists and sexual perverts alike, both of whom he classed as 'degenerates,' married only men whom they could 'rule, govern and cause to follow [them] in voice and action'" (121). This article appeared the same year Gilman married for the second time a man not only slight in build and

modest in person but younger than her. Bound by a society that demanded that the roles and functions of men and women be strictly separate, Gilman came to see herself as being most suitable for the male role, even in her relationships with men. In a letter to her prospective husband, Houghton, she recalls that "I told Walter once I wished he was a woman, and it seemed to hurt his feelings. I can see why now, but I didn't then" (Lane 200). In another letter to Houghton prior to their marriage she attempts to define the nature of their roles, writing that because of her work, she assumed "what has always been held a man's place" but that "[a]s we have often noticed . . . you held the woman's place toward me." She went on to characterize their relationship in words that might have been taken from Howard: "I seem to be swallowing you . . . [but] you are the kind of angel that only seeks to be swallowed" (Lane 213). Even her use of the term "angel" to describe her future husband is a reversal of the Victorian concept of woman as the passive and dutiful "angel of the house."

In trying to reconcile her personal desires with her gender, Gilman faced what appeared to be an impossible dilemma which could not be resolved through either the feminist rebellion she espoused in her political work or the kind of gender-bending role reversals she attempted with varying success in her relationships with both men and women. The cultural constructions of the late nineteenth century did not leave much room for escape. When Gilman wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper," gender stereotyping went beyond the social enforcement of behavioral norms, finding support in the sciences of medicine and biology which were in the process of constructing a body of knowledge that claimed to demonstrate that sex-differentiation was innate and determined by scientific laws. Gilman followed these scientific developments with interest and adopted them in her own analyses of the relationships between men and women. In her autobiography, she records that the only works she read in researching Women and Economics (1898), were Evolution of Sex (1889) by Patrick Geddes and his student, J. Arthur Thompson, and an article by Lester F. Ward (259).¹⁶⁰ Ward,

¹⁶⁰ Larry Ceplair reviews Ward's ideas and the nature of his influence on Gilman in Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Nonfiction Reader (26-29). Jill Conway provides a useful outline of Geddes's theories in "Stereotypes of Femininity in a Theory of Sexual Evolution" (Golden 71-82).

who Gilman referred to in her autobiography as “the greatest man I have ever known” (187), argued that human beings could control the course of evolution and that women, as the superior sex responsible for reproduction, had the key role to play in that process. Geddes was an influential Scottish biologist who argued that differences in the temperament, emotions, and abilities of men and women arose from a basic difference in cell metabolism and were therefore traceable to the simplest forms of life. According to Geddes, femaleness is characterized on the level of the cell by the capacity to store and build up energy, and maleness by the tendency to dissipate energy. Thus, female cells have “the power to conserve energy, support new life, and to maintain stability in new forms of life” (Golden 73). While Geddes’s theories supported the idea of women’s innate superiority, they also corroborated the conservatism of nineteenth-century society by providing scientific evidence to support the differentiation of male and female roles according to which women were innately suited for motherhood and unsuited for a life of the mind. In such an intellectual climate, someone like Gilman, who saw herself as more suited by desire and temperament for the life of a man than a woman, must have perceived herself as not only a social deviant but as an evolutionary freak who, like Freeman’s Jane Lennox, was a graft on the tree of womanhood.

Although it seems clear from her language that Gilman saw herself as an invert in her relationships with both men and women, she seems not to have been prepared to accept a definition of herself as a lesbian. To be an invert meant only that she had masculine rather than feminine traits, a condition she seems to have been proud of. To be a lesbian, on the other hand, was to acknowledge a kind of sexuality that was defined as deeply pathological. On December 16, 1898, the year that saw the publication of Women and Economics with its adaptation of the ideas of Ward and Geddes, Gilman wrote a letter to Houghton in which she recalls her confused sense of herself during the period after her marriage ended. In what appears to be a distorted recollection of her relationship with Walter as well as with others who followed, she attempts to reconcile her feelings for men and for women, with her sense of her own sexuality:

Queer unfeminine girl that I was, there was first the long devoted love of him who called himself my husband; then, when I thought myself a morbid strange cold sort of monster--no real woman at all--came the convincing proof that I was more woman than most--the strong lasting love of more than one man and the knowledge of--of--well, sometimes I feel like "a heathen goddess come again," a wonderful struggling mixed feeling, half shame, half pride, of being--to most people's knowledge a stern cold thinker, a calm pleasant friend of men, dearly loved by women, the favorite of children--a widow--a celibate, a solitary--and inside--Ashtoreth! (Hill 225-26)

It was, of course, when her affections were directed towards Grace, Martha, and finally Adeline Knapp that Gilman felt herself to have been "a morbid strange cold sort of monster." In a revealing letter dated March 7, 1899, Gilman more explicitly discusses her past relationship with Knapp in an attempt to make Houghton fully aware of its nature, in part because of her fear that her former lover might cause a scandal by publishing her love letters:

Adeline Knapp has (I suppose she has) letters of mine most fully owning the really passionate love I had for her. I loved her, trusted her, wrote her as freely as I wrote to you. I told you that I loved her that way. You ought to know that there is a possibility of such letters being dragged out some day. . . . I am not sorry for nor ashamed of my life . . . But you must consider the disagreeable practical possibilities like this. Fancy San Francisco papers with a Profound Sensation in Literary Articles! Revelations of a Peculiar Past! Mrs. Stetson's Love Affair with a Woman. Is this Friendship! and so on. Dear Heart. Am I a woman you ought to marry? Are you willing to give such a mother to your son--or Daughters? Are you sure you have understood when I told you "all"? (Lane 167-8)

This warning suggests, if nothing else, that Gilman was fully aware of how the world would interpret her relationship with Knapp were it to become

public. Her readiness to give her future husband this opportunity to get out of the engagement and her insistence that he really understand and acknowledge the meaning of what she is confessing, strongly suggest that she saw her relationship with Knapp as both "passionate" and "peculiar." I would further speculate that the pseudonym Gilman selected for Knapp in her autobiography, "Dora," the only pseudonym used in the entire book, by the way, was a subtle means for expressing and communicating her sense that this relationship, or at least this woman, did have "a Freudian taint." An English translation of Dora, Freud's 1905 analysis of an eighteen-year-old patient with what he defined as lesbian tendencies, was published in 1923, three years before Gilman began to write her autobiography, and this may well have been the origin of the name she selected to represent the woman who had disappointed her, not because she chose to marry a man (as had Martha and Grace), but because in Gilman's mind she was psychologically and morally damaged.

As I have shown throughout this chapter, Gilman struggled to understand and contain her sexuality throughout her early adulthood. These struggles came to a climax in 1890, the year when she was writing her most important fictional work. "The Yellow Wallpaper" has fascinated readers and achieved its status as a paradigmatic feminist text largely because of the emotional material that forms its subject and the emotional turmoil that surrounded its creation. Although it is not explicitly "about" gender or sexual deviance, its power has its source in Gilman's confused and painful struggles with her own identity and the nature of her desires during a period of her life that was simultaneously liberating, productive, and extremely painful. Gilman deliberately went against the grain of femininity throughout her life. But it was one thing to lay claim to the genius and the strength associated with masculinity and quite another thing to be marked as a lesbian. When "The Yellow Wallpaper" is read within the context of Gilman's struggles to repress her sexual and affectional desires for other women, we can better understand the confused and ambivalent nature of the deformed figures that emerge from the patterns on the yellow paper covering the walls of the domestic and sexual space of the bedroom and that eventually escape into the night.

The specific meaning of these figures will always remain elusive, however, subject to the individual interpretation of the person who sees and tries to understand them. "The Yellow Wallpaper" teaches us that there can be no stable or inherent meaning in any text we attempt to interpret, for what we know, or think we know, is ultimately determined by the images in our own minds. Unable to escape our own preoccupations and preconceptions, the act of interpretation sometimes can lead us, as it led the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper," into a reflexive trap in which we become caught in the space between literary tradition and personal experience, social convention and personal deviance, ideal and deformity, in a pursuit of meaning that can be as dizzying and maddening as the yellow wallpaper itself. The risk is worth it when the result is to better understand not only the struggles of another person to make sense of her own life, but our own as well. Without this desire and this result, the act of interpretation fades off into meaninglessness.

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