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Girls Never Grow Up:
Generic Impossibility and Narrative Tension in the late-Nineteenth Century Maturation Serial

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Taylor D. McCabe

Dissertation Committee:
Associate Professor Virginia W. Jackson, Chair
Associate Dean Jonathan Alexander
Professor Jayne Lewis

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VITA

Taylor D. McCabe

2014	B.A. in English and French, University of Rochester
2016-21	Teaching Assistant, University of California, Irvine
2017	M.A. in English, University of California, Irvine
2022	Ph.D. in English, University of California, Irvine

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation discusses the terms and contradictions of a genre I term the "maturation serial," series of books that document the work of growing up properly of a central girl character. The maturation serial emerges in the postbellum nineteenth century as an enormously popular and commercially profitable genre that left large audiences of girls eager for more content about their favorite characters and women authors with incentive to provide. Girl characters growing up come up against the societal demands of sentimental women's culture, which pits the terms of seriality against those of maturation. What emerges is an impossible genre, yet one that is endlessly generative. This project thus builds on longstanding work by theorists of various "impossible genres" and deploys work on sentimentality and feminism to inquire why this particular "impossible genre" has remained relatively unexplored and why the texts of the maturation serial have enjoyed such a long popularity. I look at three series by three North American authors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the *Anne of Green Gables* series by L.M. Montgomery (1909-1939), the *Little Women* series by Louisa May Alcott (1868-1886), and the *Elsie Dinsmore* series by Martha Finley (1867-1905).

INTRODUCTION

On Christmas when I was eight years old, my stepmother gifted me my first-ever copy of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. It was a doorstopper of a paperback, one of the mass-market Harper Collins children's line, which, in the late nineties and early aughts came shrink-wrapped with a necklace representing the book that smelled like cheap metal and would immediately turn your neck green. In the true fashion of a literary child, I spent Christmas Day reading, and once I was done, the book sat on the shelf above my bed until we moved, whereupon I passed it on to my then-youngest sister. My copies of the *Anne of Green Gables* series were stolen off my aunt's bookshelf—starting with *Anne of Avonlea*—purloined during visits and smuggled back to my own house until she gave in and bought me my own set because she intended to pass on her copies to her own daughter. The first and most famous installments by these authors were not enough; I tore my way through the rest of the series, following my literary companions as they finished school, got married, and had children of their own who grew until they were my age and then beyond, the agelessness of the books lending the sense that even as the characters aged much more quickly than I did, these books were still *for me*. Nor did it matter that I knew that these books had been read before, by women I knew. They were mine. When I reached the end of the series, I read them again.

Like so many other girls, these books were the first "classics" that I read in their entire, original form (as opposed to a simplified children's version like *Great Illustrated Classics*), and they came into my life in the wild, so to speak—not assigned in the classroom, or meted out for supposed educational value, but rather passed down by women who wanted to share the stories and who loved their own copies enough to keep them for

decades. As critics, we are trained to put these personal interactions with texts aside, that the way we feel about books—let alone that we may have *loved* them. We learn that even discussing such a thing when there are important issues of *quality* to be talked over is embarrassing, the kind of thinking that is, at best, a distraction from the real work at hand. Yet the feelings about books—particularly children's books, even more particularly girls' books, and especially the ones that we love throughout time—are materially important to the way these books are taken up by readers across time. How can we, then, as critics, offer a critical account of uncritical feelings about books, particularly gendered feelings about gendered books, and therefore the cultural and historical impact that they had and continue to have?

The intergenerational lives of these texts are not like the afterlives of other megaliths of American literary history, nor even like the lingering impressions left by other contemporary texts fueled by nineteenth-century sentimentality. In *The Female Complaint,* Lauren Berlant traces the "unfinished business of sentimentality in American culture" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, identifying the ways in which the intimate publics created by women's sentimental culture adapt across time, even while clinging to the same fantasies of feminine normalcy that subsume suffering under the banner of love. Berlant writes that "the gender-marked texts of women's popular culture cultivate fantasies of vague belonging as an alleviation of what is hard to manage in the lived real—social antagonisms, exploitation, compromised intimacies, the attrition of life. Utopianism is in the air, but one of the main utopias is normativity itself, here a felt condition of general belonging and an aspirational site of rest and recognition in and by a social world."[1] The feeling of identification is thus the key pacifying element of women's popular culture; the

comforting feeling of being seen and having that vision reflected back at us means that other (greater) injustices become easier to ignore. Some comfort feels better than none, even if the comfort is a distraction designed to encourage placidity. Rather than address the exhausting "larger knots of social attachment and antagonism," the unlivable conditions of feminine life in a patriarchal world, popular women's fiction offers instead a mollifying "central fantasy […] the constantly emplotted desire of a complex person to rework the details of her history to become a vague or simpler version of herself, usually in the vicinity of a love plot."[2] Love, organized under the heterosexual marriage plot, which delineates the terms of expansive feminine emotion under the dual constraints of state command and masculine influence (with all the obvious overlap therein), thus becomes "the gift that keeps on taking." Women, popular culture suggests, are best suited by simplifying their own wants into something manageable and culturally legible; only then will they not be alone in an uncaring world. The limited, unchanging emotional offerings of women's culture across the past century is, for Berlant, the point: "so much of it is marked as fantasy and expressed in extreme genres tending to hyperbole and grandiosity, which are forms of realism when social suffering is the a priori of experience, seen historically and across a wide variety of locations." [3] They trace the uptake of sentimentality across time, finding commonalities between the sentimental work of Harriet Beecher Stowe and the 1949 adaptation of *The King and I*, Dorothy Parker to Roseanne Barr, identifies the way in which, even as the impulses of sentimentalism remain the same, the particular texts to which it attaches itself shift and adapt.

Yet this paradigm does not quite fit for the case of the sentimental girlhood novel, because while the historical situation of readers has changed over time, the texts

themselves have not changed and their popularity has not waned. Indeed, even in adaptation, the core of *Little Women* and *Anne of Green Gables* have remained relatively static and enduringly profitable; the most recent on-screen adaptations of each (Greta Gerwig's 2019 film and Netflix's 2017 television show *Anne with an E*, respectively) retained the major plot points and minimally altering the characters of each, sticking to the settings of Civil War Massachusetts and late Victorian Prince Edward Island. These adaptations make only minor concessions to the demands of the sensibilities of modern audiences, such as the race-blind casting in *Anne* and offering a young, handsome, reel-dancing Frederich Bhaer rather than a stodgy old professor who disdains profitable sensationalist writing as a love interest for Jo. The relatively strict adherences of these adaptations to their original texts reveals the creators' awareness of an audience to whom such stories are beloved and who do not want an alternate vision of Anne Shirley or Jo March; what they want, rather, is more of the characters they have grown to love. The living afterlife of such characters, the sense that they remain current, is not unique to girlhood genres but rather, as Mikhail Bakhtin argues, universal to genre itself:

> Always preserved in a genre are undying elements of the *archaic*. True, these archaic elements are preserved in it only thanks to their constant *renewal*, which is to say, their contemporization. A genre is always the same and yet not the same, always old and new simultaneously. Genre is reborn and renewed at every new stage in the development of literature and in every individual work of a given genre. This constitutes the life of the genre. Therefore even the archaic elements preserved in a genre are not dead by eternally alive; that is, archaic elements are capable of renewing themselves. A genre lives in the present, but always *remembers* its past, its beginning.[4]

The curiosity of the popularity of these girlhood series is thus not that their genre has survived, nor that they feel new to every successive generation of readers, despite their increasing age. Rather, the difference is found in the stability in the canon. For this genre of

novels, the sense of nostalgia that functioned at the time of their publications still works a century and a half after their original publication. The sentimental plot, due to the constant reassertions of sentimental culture across women's genres, feels new even when it is old, connects to the impression of a recent past, somehow just out of reach even as it gets further and further away. The intimate publics created around such texts are thus expansive—perhaps endlessly, given that they have not yet reached their limits—and create an audience who longs for the feeling of connection brought about by the imagined community, causing them to hunger for more.

This hungry audience, and the answering production of authors, is what has shaped the progress of this dissertation project, in which I explore the generic constraints of what I have termed the maturation serial. The maturation serial takes, as its central concern, the progress of a girl character (or a small collection of girl characters, in the case of *Little Women*) as she moves into adulthood, chronicling her stumbles and successes along the way, charting her development as she progresses from innocent girlhood into acculturated womanhood. As with most genres, this central premise is deceptively simple: a girl grows, as girls do, into a woman, thereby fulfilling her promise and narrative purpose. Yet the things that these plot demands include—and, even more tellingly, the things they elide—leave large gaps in terms of actually building a novel. Cultural training in sentimentality fills in some of these gaps, teaching characters and readers how to fill in lengthy emotional responses to comparatively minor narrative moments. As a result, these are books in which often very little actually happens, or in which the events themselves are intentionally small, but in which the emotional responses to such events are consistently rehearsed and rehashed. Events, then, are simply the catalyst for the true plot of the maturation serial:

demonstrating the process by which the heroine learns to *feel right* about the world around her. This is a narrative structure that, even as it borrows from the sentimental women's novels that led to the rose of the maturation serial, falls short when seriality comes into play. If a girl learns all her lessons too easily, if she progresses towards womanhood too quickly, there is nowhere else for her to go, and therefore no story left to tell. Yet if she does not learn them when given the opportunity, she risks appearing unteachable, threatening that she may never properly arrive at womanhood. The results is a tension between a plot that is both builds and is episodic, that both dwells in the everyday of childhood and tries to organize growing up into a linear progression towards maturity. The narrative must both contain a place to stop (each novel is its own independent text as well as part of the larger continuation of the serial storytelling) and potential for continuation. The plot of the maturation serial, in short, becomes caught in its own contradictions, rarely making any clear developments or changes, all in the name of crafting the central girl character who holds the center of the series together.

Yet the maturation serial holds just as many contradictory demands when it comes to the development of its central character, who occupies a troubled position in regards to her suitability for a children's series simply because she must grow older. While the notion that a child narrator does not necessarily indicate children's literature has become axiomatic, the inverse has rarely been suggested, due to the common assumption that child readers lack either the interest or the sophistication to engage with adult protagonists. The politics of the relationship between the child narrator and the adult author was tirelessly debated by Golden Age authors, who saw the child narrator as an innocent Romantic ideal, a wry, impish variant on such an ideal, or a fully acculturated member of society, party to

but not yet entirely affected by the same societal constraints as their adult creators.[i5] Yet even the most savvy child narrators prescriptively *are* children, ideally aged to match their intended audiences. Age of child narrators is thus treated simultaneously as an absolute indicator of childishness and a sliding scale of movement towards adulthood.

Across the genres of children's literature, this seems to suggest that what authors have historically considered essential to child characters is not any particular quality of childishness or relationship to innocence, but rather age itself, which then serves as a canvas upon which questions of maturation come to bear. The concept of *age itself* inherently contradicts the hunger of readers for *more* that fueled the profitability of and drive for serialized publishing. Childhood is both long and short; children require time, effort, and education to 'grow up right' but also *do* eventually grow up, and therefore grow out of children's literature, at least in terms of being its preferred audience. Moreover, the timeline of childhood is significantly shorter than that of adulthood—and indeed shorter than the timeline of an adult author's career. Thus the work of writing more of a literary child involves simultaneously navigating tensions of genre *and* audience, all operating under the constant threat of passing time. These tensions become particularly augmented in the case of girl characters, for whom the threat of growing up too quickly and too slowly are equally threatening to her status as a suitable heroine. As a character ages, she must move the story along and remain appropriate for children audiences, must honor the

[i] The "Golden Age" of children's literature is commonly considered to refer to the concentrated publication of many children's classics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Golden Age titles come primarily from North America and Britain and include classic picture books as well as novels. *Anne of Green Gables* is sometimes considered to be on this list. Other classics of this era include *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain, and the Beatrix Potter books.

legacy that draws readers to grow and age with her and attract new child readers. She must age but remain young, mature but stay childlike, appeal to young readers and to those on the cusp of adulthood. 'Age' thus becomes an increasingly complex concept as girlhood characters and their readers grow. For the maturation heroine, for whom growing up is her entire project, this tangled problem becomes even more snarly. While she must begin her narrative journey as a child, and while certain developmental milestones may be noted, the maturation serial rarely devotes attention to a strict calendar of time or the repetitive marking of birthdays. Her age is important, but kept vague, as she grows through and out of childhood in further installments of her serial.

The heroine of the maturation serial thus emerges as a caveat to the rule that demands children's literature has a child narrator, suggesting that adult characters (particularly adult women) may remain of interest to children if their literary journeys began as children. The trajectories of these series (and the profitable careers they provided for nineteenth and early-twentieth century woman authors) are propelled primarily by a character, by her memory and history, and stymied, to varying degrees, by changing circumstances. The maturation of the maturation serial is therefore somewhat suspect, limited as it is by a constant return to the terms and qualities of childhood, which function as reminders that no matter how far into womanhood a character progresses, the child she once was is still in her. Maturation, in these serials, therefore cannot be tied to real change—the heroine cannot ever really grow up, not in any meaningful way. As a result, she cannot properly show her audience *how* to grow up, no matter how much this may be a purported purpose of the genre. Rather, seriality undermines any avowed role-modeling potential these texts may hold as the consequences of 'learning your lesson' rarely stick for

maturation heroines and no clear incident or development ever allows them to fully 'arrive' as correctly acculturated adults. Instead, these heroines consistently model how to properly be a girl, even as they age into ostensible adulthood, and have children of their own, and even grandchildren. And yet, the cyclical framing of development that traps maturation heroines in a sort of permanent childhood adheres to the long timeline of an actual child's development. Novelistic time passes much more quickly than the slow work of growing up, so by extending the scope of what counts as 'growing up,' the authors of maturation serials draw out the timeline wherein their heroines and their readers have work in common without being drawn into the boring minutiae of developmental processes.

The dual tools of anticipation and memory do much of the work in terms of navigating the conflicting demands of narrative and developmental time. The heroine of a maturation serial is always in a temporal tension; the time of her childhood is spent anticipating adulthood, preparing to cultivate the traits and skills required of a woman, and the time of her adulthood is spent holding on to the memories of girlhood that have established her as a suitable protagonist for a children's novel. The little girl in the beginning of the serial does not get to commit to the present experience of girlhood, because the expectations of the genre push her to continue looking forward. Conversely, though, the woman she becomes is not capable of actual, material change, lest she separate too far from the character of the girl she once was. For the maturation heroine, this creates a tension between establishing certain unchanging traits in childhood—thereby keeping the child narrator alive even as she ages into womanhood—and the requirement of those very traits to change so that a proper woman may emerge.

Girl heroines end up stuck. They cannot become women, who are a cultural problem, endlessly insisting on being seen as full people with equal merit, despite the numerous systems (political, legal, cultural, narrative, artistic, social, etc.) formulated to offer them a very specific role and destiny, from which they should not try to (and should not even want to) emerge. American society hates women. Girls are (in certain ways) more palatable. They haven't yet reached the full messiness of women, and the terms that led to the romanticization of childhood (innocence, naivete) as well as the things that make girls more controllable (lack of social power, inexperience) offers them the sense of possibility and potential that grown women lack. Girls offer the impression of being more manageable, as if, somehow, maybe, if they grow up just right, they won't become a problem. But the only avenues out of the problems of womanhood bring with them a greater societal threat; if a girl fails to 'grow up properly'—which is to say, enter an appropriate heterosexual contract as a wife and mother, thereby fulfilling the primary socially-accepted utility of women, the thing that makes us grudgingly worth it, despite our many difficulties—she risks becoming an emblem of spinsterhood, with all the queer implications that that encompasses. Girls can't become women, but they can't remain girls. It's an impossible conundrum—what, then, are they? The contradictions of the maturation serial do not provide a satisfactory answer.

At the cusp of womanhood arrives another narrative problem, that of the marriage plot. The marriage plot is the unescapable hole at the center of the maturation serial, the thing which cannot be avoided and yet is determined to forestall all future narrative possibility. The traditional marriage plot is the thing that organizes the trajectory of women's culture, particularly the sentimental novel, taking any potential purpose or

direction of a woman's life and framing it in context of heterosexual romantic love (sanctified by the state and god under the banner of legal, Christian marriage). The marriage plot, which does not necessarily even illustrate life spent in a marriage as much as it does the promise of a wedding, stands in direct opposition to the project of the serial, which, by its definition, insists on continuation. While the marriage plot provides a clear limit for women's sentimental novels, the same did not prove true for the longer timeline of girlhood maturation serials; the arrival of a wedding, often long-anticipated, did not satisfy the readership's ongoing desire to know what happened next to their beloved girl character. Yet desire on its own does not provide a framework for what can or should happen next—another challenge of the amorphousness of 'wanting more'—and women's lives, for wives are certainly and definitively women, even if they cannot leave their girlhood selves behind, cannot be turned into stories, let alone stories that are supposedly still directed towards little girls who may look to their literary heroines for a role model on how growing up is 'supposed' to go. Moreover, the lived reality of a marriage means the continual and abiding presence of an actual husband and there is nothing like continual access and the demands of quotidian labors to take the shine off a once-romantic hero. Nor is the honest depiction of the struggles of even a good marriage—let alone the everyday horrors of a bad marriage to a politically and socially disempowered woman whose identity, first and foremost, was cast as that of an extension of her spouse's—an acceptable route to take for authors who depended on their popularity with the public in order to maintain their own financial independence. Actual marriage, far more so than in the more traditional iterations of the marriage plot, emerges as a problem to be dealt with, one that must be handled carefully, without falling into the dangerous implication that perhaps

romantic love was not a good aim for a woman's life. The authors of maturation serials navigated this gap in multiple ways: dispatching a beloved husband into an untimely and much-mourned (but not too much) death; continually sending him to work, out of the way of domestic tranquility and off to the edges of narrative attention; offering him a consuming intellectual passion (men can have these sort of pursuits) so that he has something (anything) to discuss when a reminder of his presence is necessary. This problem is duplicated with the arrival of children; though motherhood may fulfill a woman's cultural promise, the work of being a mother is decidedly uninteresting, and a text must either turn to a heroine's children as a means for finding a new narrative avenue (thereby replacing her, and not really managing to give 'more' of her at all) or attempt to cling to some sort of point of interest found between the consuming labors of domestic life that trap her. The primary tactic through which authors managed the sheer boredom of everyday life, however, was to focus first on memory, on a return to the friendships and concerns of childhood, as a reminder that, though a woman, a girl heroine was still the same beloved girl and that growing up was thus (certainly, probably, maybe) nothing to fear. Thus, even as authors worked to go beyond the marriage plot to fulfill the desire for more, the non-narratability of life beyond marriage for women stymies the possibility of this, meaning that any version of a post-marital 'more' really comes to mean 'more of the same,' or 'more of the past.'

Despite these manifold impossibilities—despite the tensions that make character development farcical, despite the limitations that prevent plots from going anywhere but several narrow, prescribed avenues that then limit narrative potential even further—the maturation serial remains a highly legible genre, the limits and possibilities of which were

clearly evident to its authors. Likewise was it evident to readers, who, even from the first installments of various series, wrote to authors in droves, begging for sequels, for answers to their questions, to anything more about the characters they had grown to adore. In the case of the seventh *Elsie Dinsmore* book, author Martha Finley went so far as to elicit votes for the title of the upcoming installment, and, when *Elsie's Widowhood* was overwhelmingly chosen, accordingly sent Elsie's husband to his grave. Contemporary readers of the maturation serial knew the power of demand as much as authors understood the profitability of supply, and if both understood the insurmountable hurdle of the marriage plot that stood at the center of achieving their desires, this impossibility proved negligible. The serial potential of the maturation narrative remained generative—not despite the impossibilities of the genre, but because of them, and the ways that authors chose to navigate these impossibilities.

Of course, the concept of an impossible genre is not an anomaly; scholars across genres, eras, and geographies have documented the impossibilities of their genres of interest. The lyric has been called impossible, as have memoir and autobiography, and even the novel itself. Impossibility, then, emerges not as a deterrent to genre, but rather the thing that drives their production, that sets up the terms of the discourse around which various genres may conform or rebel to (sufficiently, but not excessively) live up to and (sufficiently, but not excessively) subvert its audiences expectations. Yet if an impossible genre is no surprise—if it is, in fact, nearly baked into the essence of what makes genre genre—then the impossibility of the maturation serial is not the reason that is has been left relatively under-studied and under-appreciated in scholarly (or, indeed, even educational) arenas? If not impossibility, if not illegibility, if not unpopularity—then what?

Looking back to the feminist scholarship of the late twentieth century, in which scholars argued for the inclusion of sentimental women's fiction in the realm of what constituted 'worthwhile' subjects of inquiry, offers an answer, albeit a dissatisfying one. The exhausting, banal misogyny of the treatment of women writers (and of the scholars who wish to study it seriously) has gained iconic representation in Jane Tompkins' question: "People [ask] whether the words I am discussing are really literary or not—are they, someone always asks, really any *good*?"[6] Citation of this question has become something of an eye-roll among feminist scholars, a recognized nod to the absurdity of the devotees of the white, cishet male Anglophone canon.[ii] Thompkins' line, and its reference, connotes the exhaustion of being asked to account for 'being any good' time and again—a ridiculous question when Tompkins published in 1985 that has only become more

[ii] Sara Ahmed offers the equation "Rolling eyes=feminist pedagogy." Ahmed first identifies this equation in a 2014 blog post about mutual recognition. There, she recounts an experience in which a diversity practitioner describes the common response to her job as "[a worker] appointed by the institution to change the institution." Ahmed writes, "She said: 'You know you go through that in these sort of jobs where you go to say something and you can just see people going 'oh here she goes.' How we both laughed when she said this; we both recognized that each other recognized that situation." The eye-roll is both the instinctive reaction of antifeminist to any sort of feminist critique—even the kind that has been actively solicited, as in the case of the diversity worker—which is always seen as a complaint (no matter how level-headed, well-researched, or calmly-delivered a critique, the feminist, and particularly the feminist of color, is always complaining, is always a nag) and a moment of mutual recognition. When the feminist cannot be heard because she is always represented as only expressing herself ("Anti-feminism is a structure of hearing, a way feminists are eliminated from a conversation; a way certain forms of critique are dismissed in advance of being made") the eye-roll between feminists is a countermeasure, a reverse rejection of the banality of the sexism that silences us in conversation. It is an expression of the frustration—and the collectivity of that frustration, which stands in direct opposition of the antifeminist impression that feminist complaint is a single woman's whining—that becomes dismissed as feminine hysteria if spoken aloud. Citing the question "are they really any *good*?" thus provides a critical framework for the articulation of a felt response. We know the question is in bad faith, and we know we will be asked—we have been asked. Citing the question—from a canonical name in American literary studies, no less—connotes the real question below: "Can you believe we are still being asked this?" [Ahmed, Sara. "Feminist Complaint." *Feminist Killjoys*, 5 Dec. 2014, https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/12/05/complaint/.]

ridiculous since, one which we are nevertheless continually asked to answer, both explicitly and implicitly. Yet even as women's literature has gained—grudging, incremental—respect in the world of literary scholarship, books about girls have not acquired the same cache, limited though it may be. Indeed, scholarship on women's novels often takes pains to distance itself from girls' novels, as if this gives them a step up in the hierarchy of 'quality.' In *Woman's Fiction*, Nina Baym marks *Elsie Dinsmore* and *Little Women* as indicating a transition between the sentimentality that dominates nineteenth century women's fiction through the 1870s and a new category of girlhood fiction that takes up the mantle of literary sentimentalism. The publishing of these two texts "[marked] the decline of women's fiction as we have studied it, because they represent the transformation woman's fiction into girl's fiction. The story of feminine heroism now becomes a didactic instrument for little girls."[7] Baym marks this as a rupture (she speaks dismissively of Finley's crude emotional manipulation, and reservedly praises Alcott), an end of the progressivism of antebellum woman's literature—even as she marks girlhood literature as finding a genesis in traditions of American sentimental literature. Feminist criticism, which continues to be forced to fight for its place at the table of literary studies, focuses its attention on women—and this is good work, necessary work—but too often leaves out "little girls"—a phrasing that carries a distinctively dismissive air. By identifying this gap, I do not intend to advocate for a rejection of feminism or even an alternative to it. Rather, the inclusion of girls' fiction is premised upon an expansion of feminism, of its greater acceptance in schools of literary though, of the allowance of more space. If we reject the notion that books about and by women—and further, that books by women about girls—do not need to be defended to be discussed, that girls need not be radical or transgressive in order to matter,

that girls are not lesser (than women, than boys, certainly than men), we open up the time, the space, and the energy for a more robust feminist inquiry about genres of girlhood.

Girls are messy and difficult; children's literature is messy and difficult, and made all the more so by the apparent simplicity (and even more so by the assumed simplicity) that obfuscates its nuances. Yet the texts that discuss girlhood in all its various iterations and ideologies—what it means to be a girl, what it feels like to be a girl, what a girl is *for*—are therefore all the more ripe for further scholarly inquiry, because even though girlhood texts have become interesting to scholars only in recent decades, they have been enormously fascinating to girl readers for centuries. Girlhood novels, and particularly the novels of the maturation serials of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have served as intergenerational links for understanding how girls read their own girlhood. These texts linger; we still read them—voluntarily, joyfully. And the problems of the genre, its limits, seem to matter no more to modern readers than it did to contemporary ones. The impossibility of maturation—and the endless generative capacity of this impossibility—inspires ongoing fascination, as do the strict limits the genre imposes on its own iteration.

I use the various chapters of this dissertation project to explore how different authors have navigated the limits and impossibilities of the maturation serial genre, stretching the possibilities of what the genre can say—which exploring the terms of her own political concerns—without compromising the enormous financial profitability that made these serials such a successful endeavor for working women authors who used writing to fund their livelihoods. To this end, I read three serials of varying lengths and overlapping timelines: Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* series (eight books,

published 1908-1939); Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* series (three books, published 1868-1886); and Martha Finley's *Elsie Dinsmore* series (twenty-eight books, published 1867-1905). While I have already invoked the enduring popularity of these first two series, the third's intense evangelical ethos has given it a more checkered history and ultimately a niche (but definitively active) readership in recent decades despite the enormous contemporary popularity that led to Finley's extremely long career. In each chapter, I look at how the various problems of the maturation serial come to bear and how each author opts to avoid or indulge in the oppositional demands of the genre.

In the first chapter, "Queer Places and In-Between Times: Forestalling Expectations and the Pleasures of Delay in L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* Series," I look at how Montgomery uses the early establishment of the central romance between Anne and Gilbert to make a promise regarding the marriage plot that she then proceeds to do everything possible to put off. I argue that only because of the thread of this heterosexual romance, upon which Montgomery spends very little on-page narrative time, is Montgomery able to indulge in loving depictions of queer romances between women, such as the bosom-friendship between Anne and Diana, spinster mentorship by Miss Lavendar, and the domestic care between elderly Mrs. Rachel Lynde and Marilla. When the time for marriage can no longer be forestalled, Montgomery, no doubt fueled by her own unhappy marriage, shows her dissatisfaction with the aftermath of the marriage plot by showing the ways in which women become secondary characters in their own lives (which, when a heroine becomes a wife, becomes impossible to narrativize) and how the cultural insistence on marriage as a happy state lends appeal to the project of matchmaking—or, put differently, trapping other women into the doldrums of married life simply for the

opportunity to re-live the exciting highs of the marriage plot. It is the queer attachments before marriage, Montgomery argues, that are the thing that make life worth living, a point made most clearly by her late-career return to the years just before Anne and Gilbert's marriage, a time which she populates nearly exclusively by queer women and girls.

My second chapter, "The Problem with Husbands: *Little Women*, *Little Men*, and Louisa May Alcott's Brilliant, Bad Sequels," argues that the shift between Alcott's excellent and beloved *Little Women* and her plodding and frankly boring *Little Men* is not a symptom of authorial failure but rather a savvy political move designed to argue against the notion that marriage offers women any route to a good life—notably by insisting, forcefully and without interruption, just how delightful her heroines, now grown, find the grinding work of motherhood. Alcott's sequels, I argue, present a world in which love is not the thing that makes marriage a problem, and that compulsive heterosexuality is not the thing that makes marriage a problem—though, of course, these things do add complications to an already bleak vision of what wifehood and motherhood may mean. Rather, for Alcott, it is *marriage itself* that is the problem. Alcott uses attention judiciously in her sequels, focusing the bulk of her attention on Plumfield, the home of Jo and Frederich Bhaer (and the seemingly unending passel of children they are raising), whose supposed 'practical marriage' at the end of *Little Women* carried at least the suggestion that avoiding romantic entanglements was the 'way out' of the trap of the marriage plot's manifold disappointments. Yet her sequels, I argue, dash these hopes not by making an on-page argument against the marriage plot (an argument too subversive to survive in the late nineteenth-century publishing market through which Alcott made her fortune) but by intentionally writing bad books that indulge in the traditional elements of the sentimental narrative, with all the simplified

portrayals of the idylls of motherhood that this implies. This move is predicated on the sacrifice of the character of Jo March, rendering her into the bland maternal archetype of Mother Bhaer, ruining the afterlife of the beloved girlhood character and turning disappointment into the central plot of *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys*.

Finally, in my third chapter, "Fathers And/As Husbands, Repetition And/As Redemption, Suffering And/As Sentiment: Evangelical Excesses in Martha Finley's *Elsie Dinsmore* Series," I use Finley's massive serial to discuss what happens when the problems of the maturation serial are not resisted, at least on some level, but rather endlessly indulged and indeed augmented by the gender politics of white supremacist Evangelical sentiment that proliferated in the latter half of the nineteenth century—and has been taken up as a vision of the idealized past by the modern-day religious right. I argue that Finley's framing of Elsie as the perfect Evangelical daughter—who is pious to the point of absurd self-sacrifice, who accepts the discipline of a correct (white, paternalistic) male authority with grace and gratitude even when his demands are absurdly disproportionate to her supposed mistakes, who exists solely to improve those around her through the consistent modeling of goodness, a living Little Eva—emphasizes the impossibilities of the maturation serial, forestalling any development both in plot and in character to the point that the books' status as novels becomes challenged. I use this chapter to culminate my project by demonstrating how, though the contradictions of the maturation serial are inherent to the genre they must be, at least on some level, resisted, lest they begin to consume the (much more expansive) terms of what makes a novel a novel in the first place.

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[1] Lauren Berlant. *The Female Complaint : the Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* . Duke University Press, 2008, 5.
[2] (7)

[3] (ix)
[4] Mikhail Bakhtin.. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, 106.
[5] Marah Gubar. *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children's Literature*, Oxford University Press, 2011, 4.
[6] Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs : the Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860..* New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, xviii.
[7] Nina Baym. *Woman's Fiction : a Guide to Novels by and About Women in America, 1820-70*. *2nd ed., with new introduction and supplementary bibliography.*, University of Illinois Press, 1993, 296.

CHAPTER ONE: Queer Places and In-Between Times: Forestalling Expectations and the Pleasures of Delay in L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* Series

In the opening to *Anne of the Island*, the third novel in the *Anne of Green Gables* series, L.M. Montgomery dedicates the text "To all the girls over the world who have 'wanted more' about ANNE."[iii] The scare quotes in this sentence understate the voraciousness of her readers, who demanded more of intrepid orphan Anne Shirley, and, in particular, a resolution to her much-delayed romance with Gilbert Blythe. This desire for 'more' Anne—and, through the presumptive marriage that would accompany such a continuation, a more *mature* Anne—would prove to be enormously lucrative for Montgomery, who, disavowing the image of the woman writer joyous in her work, famously claimed that "I am frankly in literature to make a living out of it."[1] Yet by the time Montgomery was writing in the early twentieth century, traditions of sentimentalism had shown that the maturing girlhood heroine had a clear route forward into the expected milestones and routines of womanhood, leaving in her wake a profitable path forward for her author. Montgomery, however, was both resistant to the idea that being a wife and

[iii] The order of the *Anne of Green Gables* books and their corresponding publication dates is as follows:

Book one: *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), which follows Anne through ages 11-16
Book two: *Anne of Avonlea* (1909), in which Anne is 16-18
Book three: *Anne of the Island* (1915), Anne 18-22
Book four: *Anne of Windy Poplars* (1936), Anne 22-25
Book five: *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917), Anne 25-27
Book six: *Anne of Ingleside* (1939), Anne approximately 34-40

Books seven and eight (*Rainbow Valley*, 1919, and *Rilla of Ingleside,* 1921) are commonly considered as part of the original series—as opposed to *Chronicles of Avonlea* (1912) and *Further Chronicles of Avonlea* (1920), two collections of short stories about Anne's hometown—but hold as their central character not Anne, but rather her daughter Rilla Blythe.

mother was a fulfilling route for a woman—let alone *the* fulfilling route—and a highly sophisticated professional woman who paid a great deal of attention to her public reputation. In result, Montgomery developed a series that both keenly understood the expectations of genre and the beats of the maturation serial while never forsaking depictions of the discontent that plagued her own domestic and parental experiences. The result is a series of novels that intertwines the traditional with the subversive, playing with time, delay, and the explorations of how queer relationships (and queer temporalities) may offer a more satisfying life than prescribed heterosexual ones—while simultaneously recognizing the importance, particularly for a woman author seeking financial security, of adhering to the traditional milestones of maturation.

As manifold nineteenth century scholars have noted, including Richard Brodhead and Mary Poovey most prominently, in the mid-nineteenth century, the bulk of American literary consumption happened in serialized format through magazine consumption.[2] Writing in the early twentieth century, L.M. Montgomery used the proliferation of magazine publication as a launching point for her career; in the decades before being figured as a 'literary celebrity' with the publication of *Anne of Green Gables* in 1908, Montgomery published literally hundreds of poems and short stories in various Canadian and American periodicals.[3] Though these magazines cultivated an image of Montgomery (as writer, as literary celebrity, as wife, as mother) that often left her uneasy, due to the distractions of domesticity from literary work itself, Montgomery's communications reveal a deep awareness of magazines' value to promote her career. As she wrote to Ephriam Webb, following the rejection of some of her stories on the basis of their not being 'highly sophisticated:' "It was not for the money I had written the stories, as afore said; for the

advertising value."[4] Yet Montgomery was also markedly reticent to fully allow herself to be framed as a celebrity first. Readers' voracious demand for 'more' included a desire for more of the series' authors, as well. Starting almost immediately after the runaway success of *Green Gables* in 1908, Montgomery was inundated with requests for more information about her life, background, education, and trajectory as a writer. Montgomery was initially resistant to such requests, writing, "I'll give him the bare facts he wants. He will not know any more about the real *me* or my real life for it all, nor will his readers. The only key to *that* is found in this old journal."[5] As time went on, Montgomery became somewhat less reticent, although she presented herself as deeply conservative in the few interviews she did grant, perhaps due to her position as a minister's wife.[6] As the twentieth century continued, short-format magazine serials increasingly gave way to novel-length serial episodes, and magazine's prevalence as an entryway to the literary elite declined.

In this chapter, I explore how Montgomery uses expectation of narrative promise to delay the arrival of those promises and subvert the joy of them when they finally arrive. By dwelling in the moments between the obvious milestones of growing up, Montgomery shows that pleasure may reside in the quotidian rather than the momentous, and that the temporality of growing up can be stretched in such a way that extends the joy of childhood and blurs the moment that adulthood arrives. In so doing, Montgomery plays just within the restrictions of the maturation serial's generic expectations. To use maturation as a linear connection to adulthood, and indeed as *the* connection that propels a plot, even a loose one, complicates how childhood can be represented in text. Is Anne of Green Gables a younger version of the mature, temperate mother she will become or is Anne of Ingleside the same imaginative child she once was, with her eccentricities subdued by the pressures

and responsibilities of adulthood?

The unresolvable tension between these questions—of course she is both, and of course she is permitted to be neither—underscores the main work that Montgomery does as she delays the 'arrival' of womanhood as long as possible. If the work of girlhood, these books recognize, is to become a woman, and the work of womanhood is to quash all of the impulses of girlhood, then why would any girl want to become a woman—why would she not resist the work that maturation demands? Yet, as much as Montgomery pushes the limits of her genre to give Anne time to luxuriate in the joys of girlhood—the aimless moments, the queer affections, the pursuit of play rather than work—womanhood resolutely arrives. Sustained girlhood is not just a difficulty, then, not something that a heroine can struggle for, but an impossibility; the legacy of girlhood cannot last.

The first three *Anne* novels form their own sort of mini-trilogy insofar as they follow the traditional marriage plot. Gilbert cements his position as a romantic hero at the end of *Green Gables,* when he gives up his Avonlea teaching job to Anne so that she may stay home with the recently-bereaved Marilla; Montgomery makes good on this narrative promise at the end of *Island,* when Anne, fearful at nearly losing Gilbert to a dangerous fever, admits her longstanding love and the two become engaged. In this chapter, however, I am primarily concerned with the later installments in the *Anne* series, which, compared to the early books, have been neglected in scholarship. I wish to use this series to explore the consequences on the maturation serial—even in one that so expertly handles finding pleasure in the deferral of normative maturation milestones—when *waiting* is no longer *waiting for* something. I thus look particularly at books four through six in the series; unlike the majority of scholars, who refer to *Anne of Windy Poplars* (1936) primarily in its order in

the series (fourth) as opposed to when it was written (seventh; second-to-last), I wish to treat its order in the series as dual, to discuss how it permits Montgomery to return to a site of anticipation even when the future of the series (and, thus, of Anne) is known. Approaching this text dually allows a reading of *Windy Poplars* as it functions within the trajectory of Anne's maturation progression and as it reflects Montgomery's changing vision of Anne, particularly as affected by her dissatisfaction with her own marriage and motherhood. Moving back to *Windy Poplars,* which chronicles the years between Anne's engagement and her marriage to Gilbert Blythe, reveals the challenges that the marriage plot imposes upon the maturation serial, and the privileged space of betrothal as settled, stable, and respectable as well as romantic and replete with potential. Moreover, reading *Windy Poplars* between *House of Dreams* and *Ingleside*—the two Anne-focused novels that recount her married years—emphasizes the disappointment of marriage that Montgomery is forced to keep to the sidelines if she wishes to preserve her enormously lucrative romantic through line.

My interest in the later novels notwithstanding, the first *Anne* book requires attention in any investigation of the series due to the maturation serial's resistance to substantive change. *Anne of Green Gables* sets the tone for the remainder of the series, primarily through its establishment of Anne's relationship with her best friend, Diana Barry, and her future husband, Gilbert Blythe. Anne's relationship with Diana is at least as romantic as her relationship with Gilbert; but, as Montgomery continually illustrates through her portrayal of partnerships between spinsters, widows, and children, affective relationships outside the constraints of marriage are more expansive and satisfying than those in traditional heterosexual marriages. If the linear marriage plot is about suspense—

in this case, not *if* they will marry, but *when*—the friendships, co-habitations, and non-traditional families of Montgomery's Canada are expansive and amorphous, such that their stories can expand to fill the vast horizons of the serial. As the series continues, Montgomery becomes stuck between two indescribable options: how to tell the story of friendships that endure, and how to tell the story of marriage and motherhood within the novel format. The former is too queer and amorphous to properly support a narrative of 'growing up'—which, in its very term, implies a singular, correct direction—but can appear so as long as a recognizable future remains on the horizon. The marriage plot's figuration of a wedding as the ending of a woman's narrative purpose likewise stands at odds with the continuation of a serial. What does a woman *do* once she is married? To spend time with friends is to neglect hearth and home, while to tranquilly perform domestic duties runs the risk of revealing that marriage is not precisely the happy future that has been promised. Both threaten to reveal the complex navigations of genre and narratives of gender at work beneath the pastoral veneer of a romanticized, turn-of-the-century Canada. Looming above these two challenges is the question of how to make these novels marketable, given that summaries and other promotion strategies typically refer to plot over the history of character upon which the *Anne* series depends.

I. Romantic Childhood, Mature Womanhood, and the Time in Between: Developing Anne in the Early Novels

Anne Shirley is introduced at age eleven, after she has mistakenly been sent to spinster siblings Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert, who had asked for a boy to help with farm work. Matthew, who "dreaded all women except Marilla and Mrs. Rachel" is "so ludicrously afraid" of the little girl at the Bright River train station that he elects to take her home and

let Marilla do the work of explaining the error.[7] Even before we know her name, Anne is working from a deficit, which she fills with a cheerful flood of personality, of amiability that hints that she deserves pity, but isn't asking for it. She is capable of carrying her own bag—it isn't heavy because it holds all her worldly possessions. She would love to wear a white dress one day—but doesn't expect to find a man who wishes to marry a homely orphan. Personality, rather than the innate goodness that characterized the distinction and importance of previous, more explicitly Christianized girl heroines, is what makes Anne worthy of narrative attention.

Even Marilla, less prone to sentiment than her brother, is immediately charmed by the unexpected girl, despite her lack of tolerance for Anne's "unromantic fiddlesticks!"[8] The Cuthbert siblings find themselves taken with Anne quite against their wills, and Marilla ultimately can't bring herself to send Anne off to work for "terrible worker and driver" Mrs. Peter Blewett.[9] Marilla resolves to train Anne out of the very qualities that have charmed her—Anne's imaginativeness, her playful chattiness, her emotional transparency and relentless insistence on finding romance in the everyday—even as she "smother[s] a smile" at Anne's antics.[10] Personality is the currency Anne uses to advance her situation.

Anne resolutely spends the rest of the novel alternately alienating and charming members of Avonlea society; these mishaps and their resultant apologies and amends are Anne's work of growing up and of becoming herself. Contrary to evangelist heroines, Anne does not need to learn to eliminate her "bad" qualities but rather to learn how to use them effectively. Growing up, in Montgomery's Avonlea, is thus not necessarily a process of change as much as a process of re-arrangement. The attention that *Green Gables* dedicates to cementing Anne's personality as the thing that defines her, as something that remains

relatively stagnant even as her circumstances improve, offers a tacit argument as to why Anne deserves attention in a children's novel even as she becomes an adult. She is, the novel implies, the same child so long as she remains romantic and imaginative.

Maturation serials often contain novels in which very little happens but in which the emotional repercussions of small events far overshadow the specific events themselves, establishing early on the emotional through line that will carry the heroine into appropriate womanhood. Thus, the two of the most significant affective connections in Anne's life—that with Diana and that with Gilbert—are established early and through misfortune. For Anne's relationship with Diana, this comes after "Diana is Invited to Tea with Tragic Results," wherein Anne mistakenly serves Diana currant wine instead of raspberry cordial, getting her drunk. Despite the fact that Marilla seems to recognize that this isn't quite Anne's fault at all—she recalls telling her the wrong location for the cordial—she is amused by Anne's "genius for getting into trouble" but nevertheless takes her side over that of the overly sanctimonious Mrs. Barry.[11] Diana's mother forbids them from having any further contact, only lifting the ban on their friendship when Anne nurses young Minnie May Barry through a dangerous episode of croup while both her parents and the doctor are out of town, drawing on her pre-Avonlea experience of caring for three sets of twins. Mrs. Barry, in gratitude, lets Anne and Diana resume their friendship. This episode encapsulates the rapport between Anne and Diana that lasts them into adulthood. If Anne is better at getting into trouble, it is not necessarily because she is less good than Diana, but rather more that Diana, who lacks Anne's imagination, is a bit boring. Diana needs Anne's brand of trouble—as well as Anne's ability to get out of the trouble she has caused—to keep her from falling too quickly and easily into the prescribed stages of maturation that

Anne delays. Diana is among the first of the Avonlea youth to get married and begin to have children, but Montgomery leaves readers with the impression that moving too quickly through the romance narrative is worse than delaying it, even indefinitely. Montgomery's series emphasizes other ways, albeit ones also deeply heteronormative and entrenched in values of the nuclear family, for a spinster to stave off narrative ennui—when Matthew and Marilla adopt Anne, for example, their household imitates a traditional form, even with unmarried siblings as pseudo-parents, and Marilla and Mrs. Lynde later essentially co-parent twins Davy and Dora after the death of Mr. Lynde—but a married mother is stuck, limited by the demand that she love her choices. Diana, married young, misses both the pre-marital adventures that Anne gets to enjoy, and the hope of future independence, excepting the far-off possibility of widowhood, like that of Mrs. Rachel Lynde. Diana, who never leaves Avonlea, is entirely narratively settled by the end of the second volume.

Similarly, Anne's romance with Gilbert is clearly established in *Green Gables*. While playacting Tennyson, "something happened not at all romantic," and Anne the lily maid finds that her funeral barge is sinking, leaving her clinging to the pile of a bridge.[12] Gilbert happens by and rescues her. Anne is grudgingly grateful, but when Gilbert attempts to apologize for calling her "carrots" two years prior, she ignores the "quick, queer little beat" of her heart and insists that she will never forgive him.[13] When Jane Andrews pronounces the rescue romantic, Anne snaps that she "[doesn't] want to ever hear the word romantic again" and later announces to Matthew and Marilla, "Today's mistake is going to cure me of being too romantic."[14] It is precisely these assertions against the romantic that emphasize this episode as the establishing romantic moment between Anne and Gilbert, but it also establishes their rapport, in which Gilbert is a more mature, guiding influence over Anne's

fiery temper.

Importantly, Gilbert arrives at romantic realizations first and waits patiently for Anne to meet him there; if he is reactionary, it is only in moments when Anne has treated him particularly angrily, shouting at him after he has rescued her or unkindly rebuffing his initial proposal. Gilbert is consistently characterized as steady in a manner that both allows Anne to come to romance on her own terms and, as they grow older, cause her to view her romantic notions as childish and occasionally ridiculous. Thus, Gilbert as an object in relation to Anne orients her in immaturity while giving an example for what 'maturity' might look like. Steady, level-headed Gilbert is both the model for what mature behavior looks like—while Anne is still getting herself nearly drowned over romantic flights of fancy, Gilbert has already matured into the rescuer, has moved beyond the prankster that would call a girl "carrots"—and the goal for what the right kind of feminine maturity will attain: an appropriate marriage to a steady, loving provider. Yet as Anne grows and settles into early adulthood, Gilbert remains one step ahead. Gilbert arranges Anne's teaching career by giving up his position at the Avonlea school after Matthew's death in *Green Gables*, and makes the early decision to go to medical school, confirming his professional future while Anne's remains in question. He knows he loves Anne and proposes before she realizes she returns his affection. As soon as they are married, Gilbert has a ready-made medical practice in Windy Poplars, even as Anne's position as wife and mother are only beginning to become settled. The marriage plot propels Anne inexorably forward while simultaneously consistently infantilizing her. Anne is framed as always being *just* behind Gilbert in some significant milestone, a comparison that insists that a sense of linear progression serve as a through-line to Anne's romantic, meandering episodic adventures.

The push for progress that haunts the novels suggests an awareness that, though Anne's exploits may have made her beloved, Montgomery differentiates between delay and stagnation.

This tension between movement forward and looser character exploration functions well as a means to organize the first three books, in which Anne and Gilbert engage in a clear, but not formalized, courtship. The broad expectation (from readers, from Avonlea community members) that Anne and Gilbert will eventually be married provides a plot structure around which Anne can mold her professional aspirations, first to attend teaching college, and then, to get her B.A. This latter decision becomes an issue of great gossip in Avonlea, not only because the town will be losing their schoolteacher but also due to various residents' emotional attachment to Anne, such that "Gilbert Blythe was probably the only person to whom the news of Anne's resignation brought unmixed pleasure."[15] On the opposite end of Gilbert's support, is Mrs. Andrews, who comments, "I don't see that Anne needs any more education. She'll probably be marrying Gilbert Blythe, if his infatuation for her lasts till he gets through college, and what good will Latin and Greek do her then? If they taught you at college how to manage a man there might be some sense in her going."[16] The very fact that Mrs. Harmon Andrews, who has been well-established as Avonlea's resident curmudgeon and traditionalist, is the speaker is enough to cue to readers that they ought to disagree, though the text does not necessarily suggest that Latin and Greek *will* do Anne any good—beyond their own merit.

Anne's application for her BA does not have the same implications as her application for her teaching certificate. The image of the motherly schoolteacher was firmly entrenched by Anne's vague late nineteenth-century timeline, and Anne's success not only as a

schoolteacher but as one who genuinely loves her work and loves her students feminizes her labor. Anne may not yet be a wife or mother, and may in fact be doing everything within her power to delay taking on these roles, but these apparent rejections are made acceptable by her acceptance of the quasi-motherhood of the classroom. As a schoolteacher, Anne resumes the role of the 'little mother' that she had taken on prior to her arrival at Green Gables, her history linking childishness with the maternal. This link, *Avonlea* suggests, is central to her success as an educator. Her point of connection is in childishness, imaginativeness, not authority—consider Paul Irving's repeated emphatic refrain: "YOU know, teacher." Anne is singular among adults in her capacity to retain a child's affect even as she moves through early stages of adulthood, which enables her to charm those around her, earning not only affection but loyalty, from her already-saintly student Paul to mischievous adopted orphan Davy. If we know that Anne is to be married, then these maternal relationships are clearly a practice run for mothering her own children. Thus, when Anne muses on the possibility that the lackluster courtships of her college years will end up in her being a spinster, it is a toothless threat; spinsterhood leads to problems of genre even more than the arrival of marriage by undercutting even the appearance of a linear narrative progression.

II. *House of Dreams* and Unaccounted Time: Not Yet a Mother, No Longer a Bride

As Montgomery's novels clearly indicate, marriage itself is the problem with the marriage plot; yet without it, the thread that ties the looseness of the maturation serial becomes tangled. Despite the long, romantic buildup, the disappointments of marriage become almost immediately apparent. The chapters in *House of Dreams* before Anne and Gilbert's marriage set Anne's romantic optimism against the more cautious advice of a

chorus of Avonlea matrons. Mrs. Harmon Andrews advises that Anne "wouldn't likely find married life as much better than teaching as [she] expected."[17] Anne laughs at the prospect, which, from Mrs. Harmon Andrews, becomes as easily dismissable for the audience as it is for Anne. Yet more sympathetic voices echo with similar complaints. When Marilla sighs that Anne has always been romantic, Mrs. Rachel Lynde responds that "married life will most likely cure her of that;"; Mrs. Lynde later muses that though she hopes Anne's happiness will last, and "did hope it truly, and believed it, but [was] afraid it was in the nature of a challenge to Providence to flaunt your happiness too openly. Anne, for her own good, must be toned down a trifle."[18] The previous installments (excepting, perhaps, *Windy Poplars*) in the series prompt readers to agree with Anne's romanticism and reject these warnings of tempered expectation of these women—gossiping matron, spinster, long-suffering widow—who, through time, temperament, and circumstance are far from the station of the romantic bride. Yet *House of Dreams,* establishes a new paradigm and Montgomery, via Mrs. Lynde, here offers a warning about managing expectations.

The organization of the book's early chapters follow Mrs. Lynde's predictions; there is no actual wedding scene in the novel, merely a single long paragraph about the reactions of various side characters which are largely mingled with a sense of loss that focuses on the maternal relationship between Marilla and Anne: "Marilla stood at the gate and watched the carriage out of sight down the long lane with its banks of goldenrod. Anne turned at its end to wave her last good-bye. She was gone—Green Gables was her home no more; Marilla's face looked very gray and old as she turned to the house which Anne had filled for fourteen years, and even in her absence, with light and life."[19] Anne, "the first bride of Green Gables" (per the chapter's title), must leave as soon as she makes the transition from

"bride" into "wife," as she forsakes the romantic promise of a wedding for the narrative stagnancy of a childless married woman. This departure from Green Gables is not only unlike previous absences in its permanence; rather, it is Anne who is changed and Green Gables, long the home for a queer family of spinsters, widows, and orphaned children, can no longer suit her. Marriage, in *Dreams*, is cast more as a rift than as a joining that strictly delineates girlhood from womanhood. Anne's home at Green Gables "was sacred to youth and to girlhood—to the past that was to close today before the chapter of wifehood opened."[20] The narrative persistently challenges Anne's spoken assertions of happiness not with explicit sadness but rather with a dull sense of loss and quiet complacency that stands out as disappointment in contrast to romanticized promises of matrimonial elation.

Yet *House of Dreams*, on the surface, retains the whimsy and imagination of the earlier *Anne* books and keeps this disappointment as quiet hints; rather than overly tamp down the romantic imagination that made her title heroine so popular or disingenuously paint a landscape of domestic bliss, Montgomery outsources Anne's romantic sensibilities. In *Dreams*, similar to in Montgomery's previous idyllic Canadian villages, Anne meets a collection of friends—"kindred spirits" as she would have referred to them in her childhood, who become called members "of the race that knows Joseph" in this volume.[21] This group imitates the queer family-making of Green Gables; it consists of Captain Jim "a high-souled, simple-minded old man, with eternal youth in his eyes and heart" who still mourns a sweetheart fifty years dead; Miss Cornelia Bryant "a most inveterate man-hater" with "a sort of chronic spite against men and Methodists;" and Leslie Moore, whose unhappy marriage to a brain-damaged man has left her, to Anne, "a tragic appealing figure of thwarted womanhood." [22] The cast of characters is remarkably similar to those of

previous installments, yet, crucially, by *Dreams* it is Anne herself who is the outlier, as the only member of the Four Winds Harbor group who is, ostensibly, happily married—though Gilbert's continued absences to attend his fledgling medical practice remind the reader that this marital happiness is perhaps less perfect than Anne claims.

Dreams, is, to a certain degree, not about Anne at all. The narrative glosses over any major events in Anne's life, leaving both her pregnancies to be revealed only through the shadowy impressions of other characters, and elides much of Anne's emotional processing both of the loss of her first child and the happiness brought by her second. Rather, the bulk of *Dreams* is about how Anne fits into and romanticizes the narratives of other characters, especially their losses. This is most pointed in Anne's treatment of Leslie, who is first spotted when Anne and Gilbert arrive in Four Winds Harbor on the night of their wedding.

> The girl was tall and wore a dress of pale blue print. She walked with a certain springiness of step and erectness of bearing. She and her geese came out of the gate at the foot of the hill as Anne and Gilbert passed. She stood with her hand on the fastening of the gate, and looked steadily at them, with an expression that hardly attained to interest, but did not descend to curiosity. It seemed to Anne, for a fleeting moment, that there was even a veiled hint of hostility in it. But it was the girl's beauty which made Anne give a little gasp—a beauty so marked that it must have attracted attention anywhere. She was hatless, but heavy braids of burnished hair, the hue of ripe wheat, were twisted about her head like a coronet; her eyes were blue and star-like; her figure, in its plain print gown, was magnificent; and her lips were as crimson as the bunch of blood-red poppies she wore at her belt.
>
> "Gilbert, who is the girl we have just passed?" asked Anne, in a low voice.
>
> "I didn't notice any girl," said Gilbert, who had eyes only for his bride.
>
> "She was standing by that gate—no, don't look back. She is still watching us. I never saw such a beautiful face."
>
> "I don't remember seeing any very handsome girls while I was here. There are some pretty girls up at the Glen, but I hardly think they could be called beautiful."
>
> "This girl is. You can't have seen her, or you would remember her. Nobody could forget her. I never saw such a face except in pictures. And her hair! It made me think of Browning's 'cord of gold' and 'gorgeous snake'!"
>
> "Probably she's some visitor in Four Winds—likely some one from that big summer hotel over the harbor."
>
> "She wore a white apron and she was driving geese."
>
> "She might do that for amusement. Look, Anne—there's our house."[23]

Leslie's appearance here makes sure there is no romantic gap in the novel; the very day that Anne's traditional romantic arc comes to an end, she encounters Leslie, who stands in as a useful imaginative object, first as a mystery, then as a figure of tragic romance, then (when she resists friendship) a love-object to be attained, and finally a pawn in a matchmaking scheme. As a wife, Anne's professional career is over, taking with it one of the primary opportunities for episodic plots. If she cannot work and does not yet have children, Anne must have something to fill her time while her husband is at work. Gilbert's failure to notice Leslie, despite her beauty, positions him as someone for whom the romance plot has been successfully resolved. Because Gilbert is a man, this resolution does not generate the same absence of purpose as it does for Anne. The refocusing of attention to the new domestic realm—"Look, Anne—there's our house"—puts Gilbert in the position, once again, of directing Anne towards the things that are supposed to matter next. Now married, she must make their house a home. Anne gets pulled again between the demands of narrative and those of supposedly realistic adulthood.[iv] Leslie emerges as a canvas upon

[iv] The supposed realism of the *Anne* books, in contrast to their idyllic nostalgia of a late-Victorian childhood, depends largely on the insistence by Montgomery and other locals that Avonlea was Cavendish, and that the characters in Montgomery's novels drawn from life. Indeed, the possibilities of *Anne* as escapist literature fueled the passionate desire of Montgomery's fans to find the 'real' Green Gables, Lake of Shining Waters, Lover's Late, etc., who went so far as to declare, in various publications, that they had 'found' the real version of various sites. A frustrated Chester Macdonald, Montgomery's son, wrote in 1945, "in the mind of the author there never was a 'real' Green Gables…" (qtd. In Lefevre 24); this did little to quell fans' search for 'real' Avonlea landmarks. This was complicated by Montgomery's assertions (often contradictory) that there were any number of 'real' Avonlea features, often published as promotional materials. These claims were, like many of Montgomery's contributions to autobiography, frequently vague or mysterious, contributing more to the voraciousness of her readers to know 'more' about Maud than satisfying it. In "Author Tells How He Wrote His Story," an essay she penned in 1908, Montgomery writes, "The characters in the book are all imaginary—that is, no one person sat for the portrait of any of the. But many of the incidents recorded happened in my childhood to me, or my playmates and many of the places are drawn from life. The 'haunted wood,' with its motley crowd of specters, had a very real and—to a

which these two can coexist. Anne's attention to Leslie's loveliness and her determination fashion Leslie both as an alternate romantic lead, taking Anne's place in the romance narrative, and as an alternate object of romantic desire. The queerness of this desire both makes Leslie an acceptable object for Anne's fixation—any such attachment to a man would smack of infidelity—and as an unacceptable one to the narrative as a whole. Like other queer-coded characters in the series (notably Miss Lavendar in *Avonlea*, who threatens to make spinsterhood look too attractive), Leslie must be cordoned off in a marriage that is also a love match.

It is in her capacity as victim of Anne's matchmaking that Leslie's character illustrates the seditiousness of the marriage plot. After discovering that her lost husband Dick Moore has actually died, and the man (whose memory had been lost, now recovered) she has been caring for for the last twelve years is actually his lookalike cousin, Leslie finds herself free from the miserable marriage into which she was coerced at age sixteen. Leslie plans to return to the aspirations of her youth, and determines how she can support herself and fund an education. Anne, however, schemes to reunite Leslie with Owen Ford, the poet with whom Leslie shared an unspoken love while he was her tenant. Anne and Miss Cornelia conspire to keep Owen's appearance secret from Leslie. Anne says, "'If [Leslie] found out [that Owen is coming] I feel sure she would go away at once. She intends to go in the fall anyhow—she told me so the other day. She is going to Montreal to take up nursing and make what she can of her life."[24] For Anne—who has completed her bachelors and

certain trio of children—a very terrifying existence once, and 'lovers' lane' is still as green and beautiful a seclusion as when Anne's girlish feet danced through it. As for the episode of the liniment cake, why, the mistress of a quiet little Methodist parsonage in New Brunswick will remember things about that if she ever reads it" (qtd. in Lefevre 34).

once considered the life of a working spinster herself—to actively thwart Leslie's professional aspirations is a great departure, and Leslie's response suggests the short-sightedness of Anne's actions:

> "Oh, you should have told me, Anne," Leslie cried passionately. "If I had known I would have gone away—I wouldn't have stayed here to meet him. You should have told me. It wasn't fair of you, Anne—oh, it wasn't fair!"
>
> Leslie's lips were trembling and her whole form was tense with emotion. But Anne laughed heartlessly. She bent over and kissed Leslie's upturned, reproachful face.
>
> […] "Take off your tragic airs, my dear friend, and fold them up and put them away in lavender. You'll never need them again. There are some people who can see through a grindstone when there is a hole in it, even if you cannot. I am not a prophetess, but I shall venture on a prediction. The bitterness of life is over for you. After this you are going to have the joys and hopes—and I daresay the sorrows, too—of a happy woman. The omen of the shadow of Venus did come true for you, Leslie. The year in which you saw it brought your life's best gift for you—your love for Owen Ford. Now, go right to bed and have a good sleep."
>
> Leslie obeyed orders in so far as she went to bed: but it may be questioned if she slept much.[25]

Though Leslie is ostensibly happy about her reunion with Owen Ford, the narrative reminds us that this is another coercion, far from what Leslie would have chosen for herself, and something she would have actively fled, given the opportunity. A happy marriage, in this framework, takes on much of the similar qualities of an unhappy one: it is something that *happens* to women. As Marah Gubar has noted, Montgomery's marriages come about as the result not of romantic outpouring but of *work*—often the work of outside forces, as illustrated by Anne's determined matchmaking throughout the series.[26] Marriages on Anne's P.E. Island are public affairs, not only due to local gossip and intrigue, but though the frequent implication that they could not have happened at all without external influence. Even Anne and Gilbert's engagement comes not of their long connection and friendship—Anne rejects Gilbert's first proposal, made for the sake of sentiment—but of Anne's fear that Gilbert will die, after Avonlea gossips bring news of his illness. 'Love,'

then, is not forged through presence but fear of absence, whether through death or marriage to another. Anne's matchmaker tendencies rely largely on jealousy, trickery, and the insistence of the already-married that their friends and children join them in supposed matrimonial bliss. Owen, Leslie's boarder-turned-paramour, and Leslie themselves fall in love over being unable to have one another. Montgomery paints a barely-there veneer of sentiment over the seditiousness of the marriage plot, painting it not so much as something *wanted* but as something that her characters are afraid to *not* have, paralleling her own relative apathy about her long engagement and eventual (and ultimately unhappy) marriage. Romance, the conclusion seems to be, is most romantic when it happens to someone else.

This matchmaking success, along with the other concluding plot points of *Dreams*—Captain Jim dies peacefully after a night of reading his finally-published memoirs, Leslie is connected with Owen, and even Miss Cornelia is married, though even the characters must comment on the oddity of this turn of events—are paired with Anne and Gilbert leaving their house of dreams for a larger home, with room for more children, in Ingleside. Once the plot of *Dreams* has led to safe, heterosexual pairings for all its characters (for even Captain Jim, we are reminded, is now reunited with his beloved Lost Margaret in death), Anne and Gilbert *must* leave, for there is no longer any romantic potential to explore. *Dreams* reads overwhelmingly like a novel stuck in a holding pattern, with the looming promise of motherhood as the anticipated catalyst to re-energize Anne's narrative. Yet the next installment, *Anne of Ingleside* (the last to have an "Anne" title), which opens some three years later as Anne anticipates her sixth child, operates under a much more deeply fragmented narrative. Though the first five *Anne* novels are reasonably episodic, each with a

loose through line that features a major milestone in Anne's maturation; the loosest of these is in *Green Gables*, which follows "childhood" as limited by Anne's graduation from Queens and introduction to the working world; the strictest, *Windy Poplars*, which is strictly delineated by Gilbert's three years at medical school and the promise of marriage once he is finished. While *Dreams* complicates this formula by shifting the central focus onto other characters, it retains a certain cohesion that equates maturation with progression.

III. At Ingleside and Green Gables: Becoming a Woman, Remaining a Girl

The linearity of the intertwined marriage and maturation plots is lost in *Ingleside*. Taking place over approximately seven years, *Ingleside* focuses primarily on the Blythe children and their various adventures; only the first episode, which features Diana and Anne reminiscing in Avonlea, and the last, which centers on Anne's jealousy over Gilbert's apparently forgetting their fifteenth anniversary on the same evening they are to dine with his college sweetheart, are primarily concerned with Anne. These events are markedly different in character; Anne and Diana reminisce fondly about their time as young women, before their respective marriages. "Anne forgot that she was the joyful mother of five children […] She was Anne of Green Gables once more."[27] Green Gables, and the Anne who lived there, exist in a space of timelessness that parallels the female-centric, chrono-non-normativity of the queer home that is built there. Mrs. Lynde tells Anne that "Marilla and I can't seem to get over missing you," before reflecting on the ways in which they have both kept their youth.[28] During Anne's visit, Diana and Anne visit "all the dear old spots," before walking hand-in-hand "in a silence too sweet for words" to "Hester Gray's garden where nobody ever walked now."[29] The scene is idyllic and romantic, and the two women lament having to leave; when Diana comments that she "could sit here forever [and hates] the

thought of leaving it" Anne reminds her that they "[have] got to remember our family cares."[30] *Cares* takes on a double sense here, not only of the affection given but of the burden of those affections, particularly within the constraints of the heteronormative family. Moreover, the burden of these cares is such that it eclipses the possibility for other forms of caregiving and caretaking; Anne and Diana must steal time in order to care for each other—a form of mutual care—because the culturally-supported care needs of the nuclear family (including, of course, a husband, who have intense care needs and little reciprocal care to give) have much louder demands than that of a queer relationship that has the understanding of the cost of care—and therefore the capacity to give back. Anne and Diana, former girl heroines, lack the freedom that elderly Marilla and Mrs. Lynde (and no matter how much time has passed in the novels, the two old ladies of Avonlea give the sense of always having been old and remaining approximately equally old) possess to form a queer domestic space. As grown-up girl heroines, Anne and Diana are their past and their presents, and the queer time of their childhoods that was gained by the promises of the marriage plot cannot be regained—at least not during the years in which they are 'supposed' to be dutiful wives and mothers. Thus, Anne and Diana go "quietly, silently, lovingly home together with…their old unforgotten love burning in their hearts."[31] The imaginative romance of their walk hearkens back to, but is not restricted to, the fanciful childhood that has rendered *Green Gables* a perennial favorite, eliding that Green Gables is no longer properly Anne's home (and never truly has been, for Diana), while asserting subtly that it, of course, always will be.

Green Gables the novel is thus recreated in Green Gables the space: a place of ease, reflection, and mutual care. Montgomery continually alludes to domestic overlap between

Marilla and Mrs. Lynde, who will routinely undertake the same task twice without consulting the other: airing out bedsheets, cleaning rugs. While there is a certain comedic redundancy to these scenes, there is also a touching element of caretaking-as-love: Marilla tends to Green Gables for Mrs. Lynde; Mrs. Lynde tends to Green Gables for Marilla; both tend to the home for Anne. The result is a patterned domesticity among women who all give and receive care in equal measure; caretaking is then a gift rather than a responsibility.

Indeed, the notion of emotion as a shared currency between women hearkens back to the final chapters of *Green Gables*, in which Marilla and Anne share their grief. Following the shock of Matthew's sudden death, Montgomery returns the narrative to the bond between her characters. Anne can only cry in front of Marilla, telling her, "It's our sorrow—yours and mine," to which Marilla responds that "we've got each other, Anne. I don't know what I'd do if you weren't here—if you'd never come."[32] Matthew's death thus shifts away from being about his loss—he is only intermittently referenced throughout the rest of the series, and then in the context of bittersweet nostalgia rather than the messiness or inscrutability of grief—to being about Marilla and Anne coming together. The relationship between Marilla and Anne is the longest-running in the series, and arguably Anne's most important emotional connection, and is cemented further through Matthew's absence. Without his conciliatory presence to soften Marilla's hard edges and absorb the more effusive of Anne's flights of fancy, Marilla and Anne must learn to communicate their affection for each other more directly. Marilla tells her, "you mustn't think I didn't love you as well as Matthew did, for all that. I want to tell you now when I can/ It's never been easy for me to say things out of my heart, but at times like this it's easier. I love you as dear as if you were my own flesh and blood and you've been my joy and comfort ever since you came

to Green Gables."[33] Their relationship, which had previously relied primarily on Marilla's attempts to restrain Anne's romantic streak while denying her own enjoyment of it, comes through Matthew's death more on equal terms than it had been before. Anne and Marilla are able to laugh about Anne's younger antics, and Anne is able to recognize their ridiculousness while Marilla can look beyond their absurdity to find Anne's deeply felt emotions beneath. Their connection is not necessarily more maternal, as relationships at Green Gables resist heteronormative family structures and easy labelling of the affective bonds therein, but is nevertheless closer. The narratively unfixed nature of such models of kinship suit the serial form. A sprawling series such as Montgomery's demands a certain openness to feed the readers' desire for more and an unsettled family situation that nevertheless enacts sufficient closure in terms of plot provides such an opportunity. *Green Gables* again here plays with its own contradictions. Anne's return as a needed member of the family at the end of the novel stands sharply against her arrival as an unwanted girl at the beginning. She and Marilla are united, rather than divided. And yet, they are not mother and daughter, and never refer to each other by anything other than their first names. Anne does not have, in a legitimated sense, a proper family of her own, but she *does* have a romance. Readers, even young ones, primed in the arcs of the marriage plot, know that this romance must end in a wedding and that therefore there is more story to tell. Montgomery thus reveals her mastery of the serial form even before her text has reached the status of a serial. Though the *Anne* series was written over too many decades to suggest a preplanned direction (a concept reinforced by Montgomery's own reports of her writing), Montgomery demonstrates from *Green Gables* a keen understanding of what prerequisites are necessary for the possibility of seriality. The queer family at Green Gables—and the queer community

at Avonlea—offers considerably territory in which 'more' may grow.

The closeness between Anne and Marilla is drawn upon again shortly thereafter, when Marilla learns that her eyesight is at risk, and Anne is able to stay home with her, saving Green Gables from being sold, because Gilbert sacrifices the Avonlea teaching position. The novel thus completes an arc as pertains to Anne's desire to belong to a family and community, and recommits to locality as central to identity and kinship. Anne belongs in Avonlea as much as native-born Gilbert, and circumstances mean that she is needed in Avonlea more than he is. Anne may not have found parents, strictly speaking, but she has found a family and a community, putting an end to her orphanhood. *Green Gables* closes on a mix of melancholy and optimism; Matthew Cuthbert has died, but Avonlea—and especially its women—will go on. Similarly, it is the death of Mr. Lynde that prompts Mrs. Rachel Lynde to move to Green Gables with Marilla and assist in the raising of orphans Davy and Dora. Coming on the heels of a long illness, Mr. Lynde's death is no shock, and Mrs. Rachel seems to experience more liberty than loss at his passing. Rather than serving as a unidirectional caregiver ensconced in the gendered duty of matrimonial domestic labor, Mrs. Lynde, at Green Gables, inhabits a multidirectional economy of care that is underscored by affection rather than responsibility. Though Montgomery complains in her journals about the prescribed necessity of including a moral in "juvenile tales" a moral, or perhaps a counter-moral, appears: marriage is necessarily inimical to domestic happiness.[34]

Ingleside, in contrast to the idyll of Green Gables, is a site of work. Upon her arrival home in the early chapters of *Ingleside*, Anne forces herself to re-orient her feelings. "'*How* could I have been happy for a whole week away from them all?' thought the chatelaine of

Ingleside self-reproachfully."[35] As much as Montgomery lingers on time spent away from the traditional nuclear family in favor of the joy found in queer kinships, she contrasts these scenes with the guilt felt (here perhaps underscoring her own unhappy home life with Anne's insistence on domestic happiness) when marriage and motherhood are neither *enough* for happiness nor perhaps the most direct route to it. Heterosexual domesticity and happy marriage are, *Ingleside* asserts, boring and draining; to insist on loving it nonetheless is both self-denial and survival strategy. This disappointment characterizes the key difference between the Anne Shirley years and the Anne Blythe years; though in both cases, the marriage plot-as-romance is relegated to the margins of the text (even after they are married, Gilbert is more frequently invoked to mention that he *isn't* home, rather than to mention that he is), the pleasurable waiting of the earlier novels devolves into a kind of stagnancy.

In the absence of something to wait for—a proposal, a marriage, the birth of a child—Montgomery must resort to dramatic tricks to give her central characters narrative. In the final chapters of *Ingleside*, Anne becomes convinced that she has lost Gilbert's love; after fifteen years of marriage, she feels taken for granted, a sense solidified when Gilbert seemingly forgets their fifteenth anniversary and, on the same night, accepts a dinner invitation with a former flame, Christine. Feeling matronly and unattractive, Anne sullenly prepares for the evening out, and seethes through dinner as Gilbert ignores her in deference to Christine. She resigns herself to suffering in silence until, upon their return home, Gilbert reveals that he hadn't been interested in Christine at all, but was rather consumed by worry over a patient; he has Anne's anniversary present handy. All is forgiven, and Anne vows to herself that she will never take Gilbert for granted again. Narratively, the

moment is neatly successful. Leaning on miscommunication allows Montgomery to reassert romantic intrigue between her leads without putting either too strongly to blame. The resolution acts like a renewal: yes, they *still* love one another, after all this time. Yet, with very little pressure, this happy ending (such as there are endings in linear serials) is undercut by the repetition inherent in serializing domesticity. Gilbert will always have patients and he is not asked to change his behavior in any way. Rather, it is Anne who must push down her feelings of jealousy or malcontentedness. The satisfaction of this ending relies on the appearance of change rather than any real divergence from the relative stasis of the rest of *Ingleside*, in which the passage of time is often unclear and generally only revealed in offhand references to the ages of the Blythe children.

The tension between discontentedness, deferral, and contentedness is constantly at stake in the maturation serial, and gets caught between episodic and serialized narrative structures. Though the bulk of the movement from girlhood to womanhood (and to motherhood, which is marked differently in the *Anne* novels) can be chronicled in episodes and events, the linearity of the maturation plot demands that these episodes are taken not *merely* as isolated episodes. Rather, they inherently speak to deeper meaning in the lifetime of a character. These episodes of unhappiness, of bad feeling between Anne and Gilbert, cause problems for narrative, character, and plot. This problem links back to the issue, as Montgomery cited in *Island*'s dedication, of "wanting more" of Anne, which, as the series develops, increasingly means more of Anne and Gilbert. Compare the *Ingleside* conclusion with the famous episode between Anne and Gilbert in *Green Gables*, in which Anne breaks her slate over Gilbert's head for calling her "Carrots."[36] Though some thirty-years and five volumes apart, the events bear remarkable resemblance. In both, Anne frets about her

appearance, particularly in regard to how Gilbert perceives it (the difference being his failure to know how to appropriately compliment her against failure to compliment her at all); in both, Anne's bad feeling must be resolved through her own emotional self-regulation (she must learn to control her own temper, and later, to control her own contentedness); in both, readers are asked to accept a lack of bad intent and therefore a lack of responsibility on Gilbert's part (his responses are due, respectively, to emotional immaturity that denies him the language to express his feelings for Anne, and an excessive attention to professional concerns, which mark him both as emotionally mature and as a good provider for his family). Held against one another, these scenes indicate that Anne has been permitted to change much less than Gilbert, who, despite his relative prominence in the imaginative afterlife of the *Anne,* consistently operates as a side character. Even though it is ostensibly Anne Shirley's series, and her story, she is denied much in the way of change, rendering her a flatter version of the beloved imaginative child she once was.

IV. Unhappy Marriage, Idyllic Delay: *Anne of Windy Poplars*

Similarly, Montgomery was also, but this point in her writing career, greatly disillusioned with her own husband, whose "medieval mind" was dismissive of her writing endeavors. Montgomery, particularly later in life, attributed much of her struggle with depression to a general loathing towards her husband and the housework that her marriage and motherhood demanded. These responsibilities pulled her away from writing, her "one great solace in life." Montgomery was a savvy, albeit often reluctant, navigator of her own fame and reputation, and cultivated an image of a modest, hardworking woman writer who took care to both emphasize the labor that went into her literary productions while avoiding public denigration of the familial concerns that made her so unhappy in her home life.

Montgomery's strategy to navigate this ennui is to return to the unwritten years between *Island* and *Dreams*. *Windy Poplars* takes place in the two years after Anne and Gilbert's engagement and their marriage, in which Anne serves as principal in a small-town school while Gilbert attends medical school. As in the other novels, Montgomery's beloved romantic hero hovers in the background, though his absence in Windy Poplars is more complete and simultaneously less keenly felt. *Windy Poplars* takes the marginalization of Gilbert to an extreme; though he is the addressee of the letters from Anne that constitute much of the novel's narrative, he is never present in the text. He does not appear in scenes of vacation or holidays; he doesn't speak a single word in the novel. Montgomery goes so far as to censor Anne herself when she speaks too fondly of her fiancé; at various points in Anne letters, a note in the text indicates where a love letter has been elided. Gilbert's responses are not included, and references to his life are brief and oblique. Rather, the letters are consumed with Anne's life, and the lives of the women with whom she lives. All men, in fact, are pushed to the margins of *Windy Poplars* (though a few not quite as thoroughly as Gilbert), due to the remarkably woman-centric life in Summerside, the small town in which Anne serves as school principal.

What emerges, then, is a world populated almost exclusively by women: spinsters, little girls, widows, engaged (but not married) young women. Summerside, and Windy Poplars in particular, is a town that operates on female sociality. Widows Aunt Kate and Aunt Chatty are presented as almost in a marriage of their own; they are each others' perfect complements, as Aunt Kate manages Aunt Chatty's sensitivity, and each hides the exact same vanity—bathing their faces nightly in buttermilk—from the other, afraid that the other will censure her. They share a bedroom, and manage debates (should the bedroom window

remain open or closed at night?) through long-worn compromise (each woman, alternating, gets her choice) that bespeaks a long intimacy. Rebecca Dew, their housekeeper, completes the social sphere of the house, and functions not as a subordinate, but a family member whose desires must be managed just as much the aunts'; when Anne (accompanied by Mrs. Rachel Lynde) goes to inquire about boarding at Windy Poplars, she is warned not to compliment the cat, as Rebecca Dew despises him, and Rebecca Dew will have the final word on accepting boarders. Windy Poplars is borderline utopic in this vision: it is a house where women can exist, each accepted for their own peculiarities, without the troublesome influence of men. Women here are not asked to suppress their feelings for the benefit of others—indeed, Anne's bedroom becomes the site of several emotional confessions (often with characters only introduced to give such confessions), which Anne tries to help, not control—and can always find a sympathetic ear in one of the other women in the home. The rest of the novel is likewise peppered with women: the Pringle matriarch; Katherine, the dour teacher-turned-friend; beleaguered daughters and wives suffering under the moods of a sulky father.

The women-centric world of *Windy Poplars* suggests, without claiming in such a way that might threaten Montgomery's conscious self-fashioning of her image as the wife of a minister, of proto-separatism or a total renunciation of male sociality or marriage itself.[v] The widows of the novels are decidedly odd in ways that are sometimes charming, sometimes irritating, and sometimes pernicious. Though Anne is simply taken with the aunts and Rebecca Dew, she also must contend with the bizarre Miss Minerva Tomgallon, "the lady of

[v] See Laura M. Robinson on the increased cultural legibility of lesbianism in the years after World War One and how Montgomery "'heterosexualizes' herself in such a way as to maintain the centrality and legitimacy of her long-standing same-sex attachments" (168).

Summerside," who regales her with ceaseless tales of the strange deaths in her family, barely allowing Anne to get a word in edgewise, before impelling her to stay the night in her ghostly, cavernous home. She must deal with Katherine's bitter acidity, which, prior to their reconciliation, particularly targets Anne. Moreover, indirectly, she must deal with the adult women raising dreamy little Elizabeth, who live next door to Windy Poplars; Grandmother and The Woman, as Elizabeth calls them, are frightfully strict, tamping down the imaginative disposition that Anne recognizes from her own childhood. Their peculiarities put Elizabeth's very health at risk—she is pale, fragile—and serve as a condemnation of old-fashioned notions, as it is the precise actions that they believe are helping Elizabeth (taken from their Victorian childhoods) that are harming her (Victorianism is no longer appropriate for the present).

Montgomery's refusal of separatism as an answer to the clear disappointment she feels in marriage is underscored by the few scenes in which Anne guides or helps women who must manage the feelings of the men in their lives. Notably, she helps Dovie Wescott prepare for her elopement with Jarvis Morrow, whom her father, who "has just made up his mind that Dovie is to be an old maid," has expressly forbidden her from courting.[37] Anne is comforting and kind as Dovie debates her choice, terrified that she will either lose her beau or her father forever. She remains calm and levelheaded even as a misapplication of her advice causes both Dovie and Jarvis to admonish her unfairly [insert quote.] However, on the night of the much-debated elopement, when Dovie fails to show up at the appointed place and time, Anne becomes stern: "Dovie, do you want me to drag you bodily out of bed?"[38] The takeaway emerges that while women's emotions are something that matter at Windy Poplars, in Summerside, those emotions must necessarily take second seat once women

choose to adhere themselves to a man under an appropriate marriage. This question of "appropriate" has a romantic turn under Montgomery; a good marriage is one where there is love, but, which nevertheless subordinates women's extra-marital happiness to that of the demands that she at least *appear* to be happy in her marriage. Engagement, willingly entered, is sufficient in the novel to institute these demands of love; it is only once Dovie decides to marry Jarvis that her fears about her father's reaction are no longer material. Ultimately, Anne discovers, Dovie's father's refusal of permission to marry is a trick designed to attach his daughter to the suitor of his choosing, without her realizing it; this manipulation is laughed over, despite the pain it has caused, because the girl has already married, and so her past anguish is erased under the auspices of happy marriage. Once you've 'arrived,' the journey no longer matters.

Windy Poplars thus exists in a liminal space that Anne can enjoy with relatively uncomplicated pleasure because she is also in the space between young romantic intrigue and marriage. Her future with Gilbert is assured, but far enough off (both physically, as they see little of each other, and temporally) that Anne is able to experience a certain emotional freedom. She doesn't have to worry about her narrative future (a stark difference from *Anne of the Island*, in which she regularly considers returning to Avonlea as a spinster), but likewise doesn't have to worry about the implications of reaching the end of a normative female narrative. Anne can enjoy the absurdity of the spinsters and widows of Summerside more fully because she has no risk of becoming one of them. Windy Poplars, in this regard, is like a very long vacation. Adding to the complexity of the spinster figure in the *Anne* novels is Miss Cordelia's assertion in *Dreams* that there is truly no such thing as a living spinster, as it is impossible to know you are a spinster until you're dead (a claim that foreshadows her late-

in-life marriage that surprised everyone who knows her); while this vision of spinsterhood comes later in Anne's life, it arrives earlier in Montgomery's career, leading contemporary readers of the *Anne* novels to understand that even idyllic spinsterhood is always threatened by the specter of marriage. To be married at any point, under this paradigm, rewrites any history of spinsterhood, erasing it and reshaping it as a period of waiting. Such a perspective on marriage as the defining incident that structures intimacies even decades before a woman's wedding day both allows Montgomery to sink more fully into relationships between women while remaining within the strictures of conservative Canadian society while hopelessly undercutting them.

Postponement, but not abandonment, of the disappointment of the marriage plot, becomes the objective of the maturation serial, with the caveat that such deferrals have a diminishing return, each paid against the promise outlaid in the initial introduction of the socially unconstrained child narrator. The first three books of the series have been the focus of the majority of *Anne* scholarship—and, indeed, the bulk of adoration from fans over the last century. Montgomery's brilliant execution of the serial structure renders them enormously satisfying; the episodic events give Anne, particularly in *Green Gables*, space to explore her imagination, build friendships with girls and women, and, most notably in *Island*, pursue professional desires. As Marah Gubar has argued, "Montgomery demonstrates the enormous expenditure of time and effort necessary to bring about 'The End' embodied by heterosexual union. At the same time, she indicates that these lengthy delays make room for passionate relationships between women that prove far more romantic than traditional marriages."[39] Waiting and delay in the early *Anne* novels thus become pleasurable, rather than onerous, and open space for the creation of queer families

and time for self-development that is truncated in a narrative that rushes "the end" of its heterosexual promise. If 'growing up' is the work of childhood, Montgomery's series reminds her readers that doing so *slowly* is the way to find pleasure in this work. The work of womanhood, she asserts, does not offer such joy.

Even within the initial trilogy, scholars have described a decreasing satisfaction with each successive sequel; Elizabeth Epperly comments that "as an active frolic that continues the good times of *Anne of Green Gables*, the sequel [*Avonlea*] is a success; as an exploration of Anne's development and thinking, the book is a qualified failure" while Sarah Galletly ascribes this tension to an "increased emphasis on Anne's external rather than internal realities – what Anne *does* rather than what Anne *thinks* – [as allowing] readers to gain a greater understanding of the alternating desires to both resist and conform that many Canadian women struggled with at the turn of the twentieth century."[40] The pressures of adult femininity, appropriately acculturated, as early as *Avonlea*, then, here come to bear in terms of action and performance rather than thought. Previous scholarship on the *Anne* novels has lamented that the sequels, as early as *Avonlea*, shift focus from what Anne *thinks* (in *Green Gables*) to what Anne *does* as she becomes a young adult and full member of Avonlea society.[41] However, her marriage prompts another change: from what Anne does to how she *reacts*. Epperly traces this back to *Avonlea*: "Gilbert stands for what is supposedly superior: the world, work, knowledge, struggle, advancement, honour, strength, action, *male*; Anne stands for their supposedly inferior opposites: domesticity, pleasure, feeling, effortlessness, complacency, self-indulgence, weakness, reaction, *female*. Montgomery's largely unchallenged stereotypes are at the root of the book's problems because prescriptions and conventional romance seem so often to go together."[42] Galletly views this

division as overly simplistic, countering that "due to Anne's eventual destiny as Gilbert's wife and mother of his children, her more 'masculine' characteristics such as her ambition and competitiveness (which were a main focus of *Green Gables*) must be suppressed in order to emphasize her more maternal and feminine traits, but these do not leave her free of all agency and personal ambition."[43] The framework of 'personal' ambition transforms as Anne becomes mother, however; far more than during her schoolteacher years, in which Anne operates as a quasi-mother to her students, allowing her personal and professional interests to combine as factors of self-image, Anne's role as a mother demands that she see her children as an extension of her personal ambition, but, within the idyll of Montgomery's Prince Edward Island, only when mothering goes well.

Anne's pregnancies are continually glossed over, eliding the possibility of any direct reference to sex, and any grief she is permitted to feel over the death of her first child is hidden beneath the narrative's focus on Gilbert's concern for Anne's health after the difficult childbirth. Moreover, these experiences are all but forgotten once Anne has further, surviving, children. Trauma and loss are not part of the narrative of motherhood that Montgomery increasingly uses to structure her series. If, formally speaking, *Ingleside* is scarcely different from *Green Gables*—both are highly episodic, focusing on discrete events to illustrate the shape and scope of Anne's life—they are, affectively speaking, starkly different. As a wife and mother, Anne is permitted to be little else, even incidentally; the action of the episodes of *Ingleside* depict primarily the antics of the various Blythe children, followed by Anne praising, reassuring, or instructing them, as necessary. For a reader interested in Anne's character, or even in the romance between Anne and Gilbert, *Ingleside* is a project in disappointment. If the work of the maturation serial is growing up,

Montgomery does not make an encouraging case for the project.

Yet, as Benjamin Lefevre notes, there is a seductive appeal, as a reader, to sinking into this horizon of infinite delay: "When I started digging through […] materials pertaining to Montgomery's work and legacy, I was motived by a desire, shared by most of her readers, to keep on reading, to delay inevitably the final 'the end' to her work."[44] Lefevre's desire for an inevitably delayed end (an arrival that is inherently inevitable in any serial or career, even if limited only by the lifespan of the author, as with Martha Finley's *Elsie Dinsmore* series) speaks to an expansiveness in Montgomery's work that is undercut by Anne's singularity. Anne remains central to the series—the shift to Rilla Blythe as protagonist in the latter two novels derives primarily from who her mother is, rather than the force of character that brings us Anne in the first book—but as a center that is increasingly disconnected from the serial's purpose. By the time she becomes a mother, a woman must have reached full maturity; indeed, on a normative cycle, she reaches full maturity precisely by *becoming* a mother. Propelling her to grow further is inimical to the insistence that Anne has already grown as far as she needs to, an insistence that is necessary to the vision of the 'angel of the house' mother at leisure that is cultivated in *Ingleside*. Ultimately, the *Anne* series is one that, despite Montgomery's skillful navigation of manifold tensions, sinks increasingly into a conservatism that frames growing up as growing into a destined set of social norms that is avoidable only by the few, and that continue to loom over even supposed spinsters for the whole of their lives. The maturation serial takes the shape of a genre that is characterized in part by its inherent problems, by an unsustainable aimlessness that struggles to carry the whimsy of childhood into the long expanse of adulthood.

[1] Clarence Karr, *Authors and Audiences - Popular Canadian Fiction in the Early Twentieth Century*. MQUP, 200048
[2] Richard Brodhead. *Cultures of Letters,* University of Chicago Press, 1993, 48.
[3] Benjamin Lefebvre, (ed). *The L.M. Montgomery Reader: Volume One: A Life in Print*. University of Toronto Press, 2013, 7.
[4] L.M. Montgomery, Hildi F. Tiessen, and Paul G. Tiessen (eds). *After Green Gables*: *L.M. Montgomery's Letters to Ephraim Weber*, *1916–1941* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006, 154.
[5] L.M. Montgomery, *The Complete Journals of L.M. Montgomery : the PEI Years, 1901-1911 / [edited by] Mary Henley Rubio and Elizabeth Hillman Waterston.*. Don Mills, Ont: OUP Canada, 2013: 79.
[6] Lefevre 9
[7] L.M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables*. 1908. New York: Bantam, 19989, 11
[8] (24)
[9] (46)
[10] (47)
[11] (127-8)
[12] (223)
[13] (225)
[14] (226-7)
[15] L.M. Mongtomery, *Anne of Avonlea.* 1909. New York: Bantam, 1998.232
[16] (252)
[17] L.M. Mongtomery, *Anne's House of Dreams.* 1917. New York: Bantam, 1998,*2.*
[18] (14), (20)
[19] (21)
[20] (19)
[21] (38)
[22] (27), (30), (77)
[23] (37-8)
[24] (37-8)
[25] (207)
[26] Marah Gubar. *"'Where Is the Boy?': The Pleasures of Postponement in the Anne of Green Gables Series." The Lion and the Unicorn 25,* no. 1, 2001, pp. 47–69, 47.
[27] L.M. Montgomery, *Anne of Ingleside.* 1939. New York: Bantam, 1998,2.
[28] (2)
[29] (7), (12-3)
[30] (13)
[31] (13)
[32] *Green Gables* 296
[33] (296)
[34] Montgomery 2013: 19
[35] *Ingleside* 14
[36] *Green Gables* 111
[37] L.M. Montgomery, *Anne of Windy Poplars.* 1936. New York: Bantam, 1998, 214.
[38] (221)
[39] Gubar 47
[40] Elizabeth Epperly, *The Fragrance of Sweet-Grass: L.M. Montgomery's Heroines and the Pursuit of Romance*. University of Toronto Press, 2014, 41; Sarah Galletly, Rose-Tinted Ideals and the Threat of Spinsterhood: Teaching and Maternalism in Anne of Avonlea (1909) (*Idéaux Édulcorés et La*

Menace Du Statut de 'Vieille Fille': L'enseignement et Le Maternalisme Dans Anne of Avonlea (1909)." *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2016, pp. 25–45, 27.

[41] Galletly 41

[42] Epperly 44

[43] Galletly 39

[44] Lefevre 6

CHAPTER TWO: The Problem with Husbands: *Little Women*, *Little Men*, and Louisa May Alcott's Brilliant, Bad Sequels

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) is likely the most successful, most critically acclaimed, and most widely read girlhood novel in the American canon. But *Little Women*'s two sequels—*Little Men* (1871) and *Jo's Boys* (1886)—are largely ignored because they are, in many ways, terrible books. The sequels, which can only be termed serials in the loosest terms, betray the feminist inclinations of young and idealistic Jo March by forcing her into a farce of domestic bliss, rendering her character virtually unrecognizable from the beloved scrappy tomboy of the first novel. *Little Men* is both a direct continuation from *Little Women* and a direct departure. *Little Men* follows up on the plot that *Little Women* promises: Jo, now married, has opened a school at the property she's inherited from Aunt March, and Meg and Amy are off, married and mothering. Affectively, though, *Little Men* takes the issue of moral education for girls as discussed in the first novel and transposes it onto a school for boys in a manner that trades *Little Women's* expansive imaginativeness for rigid prescription. On the surface, *Little Men* seems to advocate for traditional heteronormativity, and feminist critics have construed this as Alcott capitulating to the demands of dominant culture. And indeed, a cursory reading of *Little Men* within the context of mainstream nineteenth century gender politics makes this logic appealing; compared to the delightful charm that has made the March sisters perennial favorites for well over a century, *Little Men* is staggeringly, almost absurdly boring. While it may be tempting to read this boredom as a failure on Alcott's part, born of the coincidence of readers' demands and lack of inspiration for a sequel, I read it, in this chapter, rather as a

sign of Alcott's subtlety and genius. In taking Jo March, the most spirited March sister, who, far more than Meg, Beth, or Amy, resists the demands of what traditional womanhood *should* look like, and making her the work-worn mother-figure not only to her own child and the passel of boys who attend Plumfield school but also, almost inexplicably, to Meg's twins as well, Alcott deftly navigates the demands of her public and of the marriage plot without betraying her own convictions or the sense of "perversity" that led her to positively refuse to marry Jo to Laurie. In laboriously recounting the drudgery of domestic work, the constant attention demanded by children, and the ways in which Jo's patience is continually tried (but never overcome), Alcott portrays the seditiousness of love as labor. Read thus, Alcott uses her bad serial to make a far more powerful subversive argument than a good serial could make, not despite dominant cultural narratives, but because of them, not by rejecting the marriage plot, but by engaging with its absurdities so eagerly that it reveals itself to be farcical.

Of all the authors that I discuss in this project, Alcott thus reveals herself as the one most resistant to the demands of the maturation serial—and therefore, I argue, most aware of the nuance of its limitations. Alcott navigates this by taking the concept of the 'serial' in only the loosest, most expanded terms; while her characters remain (nominally) the same and the setting stays (supposedly) similar, the feel of the book shifts dramatically, sacrificing joy and playfulness and love among sisters for plodding duty and moral pedagogy among parents and schoolmates. Alcott thus offers 'more' of the March sisters in only the most technical sense. Not only are Amy and Meg almost entirely absent from the narrative, but Jo isn't properly Jo. Rather, Alcott introduces in *Little Men* a new character with the same name and history, suggesting that, under the terms of the marriage plot—

and the demands of marriage itself—there is no 'more' Jo. Alcott operates around the limitations of the maturation serial by recognizing its impossibility, knowing that womanhood erases girlhood, but then, crucially, writing the book anyway. Alcott's work within but against the terms of the maturation serial refutes the notion that growing up can be even remotely linear and that the 'arrival' of a woman is heralded by anything less tragic than the death of the girl she once was.

While enormous scholarship has been done on *Little Women*, rightfully marking it as one of the great novels of the nineteenth century, comparatively little work has been done on *Little Men*, perhaps because it is, in many ways, a bad novel, and, more evidently, a bad entry in a series. The critical treatment *Little Women* has received has largely held it as an uncommonly good novel, which has lead to its being held apart not only from installments in its own series, but from other children's novels as a broad category. The theorizing on women's domestic fiction of the nineteenth century that proliferated in the 1990s frequently includes *Little Women*: Richard Brodhead devotes a chapter of *Cultures of Letters* (1993) to Alcott, as does Elaine Showalter in *Sister's Choice* (1991). Alcott additionally merits mentions from Gillian Brown (1990) and Shirley Samuels (1992). Each of these writers uses Alcott to support their arguments about cultures surrounding women's novels and women's readings, often comparing her to Stowe, the great icon of sentimental fiction. I do not reference these scholars to dispute the ways in which they have marked *Little Women* and Alcott as emblematic of the traditions of literary culture that developed around women's fiction in the nineteenth century. But holding *Little Women* apart as the one children's novel that attains literary status, to the point of ignoring others—or, even more limiting, as a children's novel that manages to be literary despite its

audience; Showalter frames Alcott in contrast to "the lachrymose sentiment, and the lugubrious piety that characterize[s] so much female scribbling of the period," a category into which she specifically places Susan Warner—forestalls an understanding of how children's literature, as a broad mode, contributed to intergenerational continuation of sentimental culture. [1]

Children's literature scholars have worked to further contextualize *Little Women* within the history of juvenile novels that occupied and increasing portion of the literary marketplace over the course of the second half of the nineteenth century. In the postbellum United States, books for children separated into distinct categories of books for boys and books for girls, a phenomenon which Gillian Avery argues parallels the development of children's literature as its own mode. *Little Women* is a feature in children's literature studies, whether specifically focused on gender or not; Alcott is discussed by Karen Sanchez-Eppler in *Dependent States*, Anne Scott MacLeod in *American Childhood*, and in Seth Lerer's large-scale review in *Children's Literature*. Despite Alcott's ubiquity in children's literature studies, *Little Women* and its sequels are rarely discussed together as a cohesive serial; *Little Women* receives literary treatment while *Little Men* and, less frequently, *Jo's Boys* are read as oddities that get attention due to their author's reputation rather than their own perceived quality. The serial—an excellent novel and two sub-par ones—works together to make a stronger political argument about women's domestic fiction than either a good or a mediocre novel could accomplish alone, not *in spite* of being a children's novel but because of it. By being good and then bad, Alcott gathers and then selectively betrays her audience and their expectations, and is thus able to point out the problems in the marriage plot as forcefully as she does only because of seriality.

Alcott scholars have also looked at *Little Women* and its sequels as a moment of aberration, often presenting the transition to domestic fiction as forswearing the more radical feminist principles apparent in her earlier adult novels, some of which were published anonymously; in her 1993 *Whispers in the Dark: The Fiction of Louisa May Alcott,* Elizabeth Keyser proposes a resistance to the wholesale reading of Alcott as "turning to the conventional and formulaic and turning from the darker or more problematic aspects of human, especially female, experience," arguing instead for a long view of Alcott's career that sees, in Alcott's domestic novels, "beneath the surface […to] the passions, antagonisms, and power struggles that complicated gender relations in the sensation fiction [that] continue unabated and threaten to erupt."[2] Despite the admonition to previous Alcott scholarship's tendency to underestimate the feminist inclinations of Alcott's later work, Keyser is hesitant to entirely dismiss the argument that the apparent heteronormativity of Alcott's final novels is a capitulation to dominant cultural narratives. Keyser frames the feminism that emerges in Alcott's domestic fiction as something like a happy accident, crediting Alcott's "imagination, if not always her conscious intent" as creating the possibility for "oppositional reading."[3] These hidden, subtextual feminist messages, Keyser claims, offer readers a possible avenue to disagree with characters who advocate for an adherence to traditional gender norms. Jo serves as a particular touchstone for this; as Keyser states, "despite her rebellion in *Little Women* against gender-role stereotyping, Jo in *Little Men* seems to acquiesce in and even encourage it."[4] Though Keyser sees more feminist possibility in *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys* than most scholarship accounts for, her reluctance to credit Alcott for the presence of these subversive messages shortchanges both the author and domestic fiction as a genre. Keyser frames the feminist potential in

Little Women, Little Men, and *Jo's Boys* as something that exists despite Alcott's movement into domestic fiction, a genre that, by this logic, is inherently regressive. Jo's "acquiescence" in *Little Men* is therefore merely the giving in to pressure towards the conventional, her "rebellion" against gender stereotyping effectively squashed. But this assumption, that Alcott merely caved to the economic potential in writing a less subversive novel, fails to adequately account for the disengaged storytelling in *Little Men*—giving in to social and economic pressures does not necessarily correlate with the ability to write an engaging novel—and discounts the role of seriality in the transition between *Little Women* and *Little Men*

In the United States, *Little Women*'s publication history has largely erased the seriality of its original release. *Little Women* and *Good Wives*, unlike in UK editions, are almost exclusively released in a single volume, often without even a section marker denoting the two parts as separate. While *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys* have not gone out of print, they have attained nowhere near the status of their predecessor. These latter two books are held separate from *Little Women,* their status more that of a sequel—a book that happens to come after another, with the same or similar characters—than a serial, whose project centers itself on continuing the spirit of the preliminary text. In girlhood novels, the problem of the serial comes from continuing the spirit of childhood into the work of adulthood, in converging the romance of the marriage plot to the inimical repetitiveness of marriage and motherhood. The portrayal of domestic adulthood in plot requires a shift in attention, often turning focus to the next generation of children, that ignores by design the parenting required to make space for childhood. Alcott sidesteps that problem by refusing to infuse life at Plumfield with any of the charm of whimsy of the March sisters' upbringing.

Rather, Alcott dances between the expectations of the serial, of the marriage plot, of her audience to make craft a highly effective, thoroughly bad novel that, by its very insistence on the joys of mothering, demonstrates the sheer odiousness of child-rearing.

I. Growing Girls and Malcontented Mothers: the Growing Pains of Domestic Education in the Marriage Plot

The 'badness' of *Little Men* operates on two registers. First, it is a disappointment as a children's novel in its own regard. While *Little Women* pays careful attention to the characters of the March sisters, including their flaws, these qualities are not viewed necessarily as merely errors to be erased. This, of course, is portrayed most famously in the scene following Amy's near-drowning, when Jo laments the terrifying consequences of her temper. Marmee, who has been "angry nearly every day of her life" counsels Jo to manage, not eliminate, her temper. Though nearly losing her sister does prove a pivotal moment for Jo—there is not an equivalent example of her anger in the remainder of the book—Marmee's advice is a reminder that not only is idealized womanhood unattainable, but unnecessary. Marmee is a successful mother not despite her flaws, but because of them; not due to the time she spends minding her children, but due to the time she allows them to develop on their own. The result is a novel that is playful and perennial, enjoyable to readers who grew up not only under mid-nineteenth century visions of what a happy domestic nuclear family looks like, but to girls for the better part of two centuries. But Marmee is a not a main character; her time spent doing things other than mothering is spent off the page, which gives a certain latitude to *be* off the page, a courtesy not extended to a main character mother, who cannot spend her time self-indulgently developing her own interests, lest her image as a placid parental constant be disrupted. A main character

demands attention on what she does; if she is a mother, what she does must be mothering, always. And if she is always mothering, her children must be constantly mothered. Novelized childhood, from *Little Women* to *Little Men,* shifts from being characterized by unstructured imaginative play to highly structured moral education. To turn from this mode of modeling family life—and childhood, and girlhood, and womanhood—to that of *Little Men* (even accounting for the relative decrease in playfulness of *Good Wives*) is a sharp turn.

In *Little Men*, the characteristics of the Plumfield boys—good or bad—are presented as qualities to be *managed*. Plumfield is a school masquerading as a home, but it remains a school, and the moral education that boys receive there is designed to curtail their bad habits while emphasizing their good ones. The quarter-hour per week that the boys are permitted to have pillow fights is a (notably brief) period in which they boys are allowed to have what appears to be unstructured play, which is not only strictly delineated, but also is carefully calculated as an outlet for energy that will prevent the boys from misbehaving at other points in the week. Indulging the impulses of childhood becomes then about suppressing those impulses; play is not a means for self-exploration or development of identity (in the way that play is sometimes referred to, in a deeply capitalist sentiment, as "the work of childhood") but as a means for releasing enough energy that the boys are better prepared to do more actual *work*. And they do: the boys enact little economies, growing vegetables in their miniature garden plots, selling the eggs they collect from the henhouses back to Mrs. Jo. Because everything, including the things they enjoy, is for the boys' betterment, nothing is, strictly speaking, for their enjoyment. In *Little Men,* structure imitates aimlessness and entertainment imitates labor. It is, compared to the imaginative

landscape of *Little Women*, a novel that presents a very adult-centric view of an idealized childhood. It is a book designed for the sensibilities of parents—perhaps the kind that wish their children to read novels that are wholesome and edifying—not for the particular delight of children, regardless of gender.

Second, *Little Men* is a disappointment as a sequel or serial in that it neither presents a satisfactory afterlife to the characters introduced in *Little Women* nor introduces a new set of characters that is compelling in their own right. New children are continually coming and going, keeping the cast of characters large and inconstant. In each didactic episode on child-rearing, which is framed as being more central to the novel than childhood itself, readers are reminded of the various qualities of each boy and, eventually, girl. Upstanding Demi and eager Nat are joined by energetic Nan and troublesome Dan as well as a host of others, who come together in various altercations that all end with discussion of how Jo or Bhaer decide to react. An episode after Nan's arrival, for example, in which some of the boys have goaded her into hitting her head against the barn to prove her assessment that "'I never cry, no matter how much I'm hurt,'" Bhaer "[looks] down the long table with towards his wife and [says] with a laugh in his eyes, 'This rather belongs to your side of the house, so I won't meddle with it, my dear.'"[5] Jo, who "[likes] her little black sheep all the better for her pluck," informs the boys that she has brought Nan to Plumfield to "'help [her] make little gentlemen of you'" since they "'have shown that some of [them] need it,'" and reminds them of the value of treating others as they'd wish to be treated.[6] The boys are thus reminded of the importance of good manners and behave accordingly, at least for a while. Little girls are thus framed as tools to aid in the reforming of little boys—Nan's "pluck," even when self-destructive, is charmingly tolerated while the boys are to be

'improved'—and little boys proto-men that need to be improved in mind and character. The Plumfield students are thus framed more as tools and materials for shaping future adults than child characters in their own right and little girls are prepared to be little wives, taught early that their development is secondary to that of boys and men. It's an ethos of childhood that operates in direct opposition to that of *Little Women*.

Where the shift between *Little Women* and *Little Men* is perhaps most painful, however, is in the depiction of how the characters from the first novel have grown up. In *Little Men*, Jo March becomes "Mother Bhaer" or "Mrs. Jo" to the collection of boys she raises at Plumfield. She is framed as a consummate caregiver, one with particular insight into the psyche of little boys, who understands that demands for good behavior must be interspersed with the opportunity for free play and chaos--Mother Bhaer watches on with fond tolerance as Plumfield students engage in their weekly scheduled pillow fight. While Bhaer takes in hand the intellectual development of the children, Jo is relegated to the more domestic functions of the school, tending to kitchens and bedtimes and often found ensconced with the only other "little woman" at Plumfield: Meg's daughter, Daisy. The day to day activity of Jo's life at Plumfield thus resembles an extreme version of the life she so despaired of on Meg's wedding day, one where Jo must not only manage house and husband, must not only keep a tight rein on her emotions and model Marmee's good-tempered patience, must not see the work of a woman become increasingly synonymous with the work of a wife, but must do so for dozens of little charges. Fans of *Little Women* have to imagine that, seeing this scene, Spinster Aunt March would roll in her grave. The whole scene is so starkly different from the future imagined by tempestuous tomboy Jo in *Little Women*—or even that of the working woman in *Good Wives*—that it seems almost

impossible to reconcile the two figures.

Indeed, framing *Little Men* around Jo—ostensibly the least likely of the surviving March sisters to sink so deeply into domestic bliss, such as it is—offers Alcott certain subtext available only to readers who are familiar with *Little Women*. Though it is Meg March who spends her girlhood dreaming of love, marriage, and children, *Little Men* shows Jo as the de-facto mother for Meg's twins, Demi and Daisy Brooke. The *why* of all this—why would Meg, of all people, give up her much longed-for little domestic sphere? Why do her children, who profess a desire to stay at Plumfield, get to have final say on where they live?—is elided. Indeed, the entirety of the sisters' relationship is left off the pages of *Little Men*; though there are references to instances in which Jo goes to visit her eldest sister, and "Uncle Teddy" makes the occasional appearance, grown-up Meg Brooke and Amy Laurence are absent from Plumfield, despite living locally. The elimination of other adult women from the sequel, particularly when their inclusion would please the built-in audience of *Little Women* fans, is pointed. Marriage, Alcott seems to imply, even as she has her characters constantly echo platitudes on the joys of domesticity, re-orients the affective lives of women, rendering the connections outside their newfound nuclear families extraneous, secondary. Though a woman may make space in heart and home for a seemingly infinite number of children—repeatedly throughout *Little Men,* Jo is the impetus for inviting more children to come stay at Plumfield—her other adult relationships, even those with her own immediate family, are relegated to the sidelines.

It would be a mistake, however, to equate a bad novel with bad writing when it is the sheer *badness* of *Little Men* that allows Alcott a subtle space to make a profound political argument. *Little Men*, as a bad novel, presents Alcott with a challenge of genre, one she

inverts by investing so heavily in generic conventions that they are thwarted. If, as Jennifer Doyle notes, "critics tend to take the transparency of [*Little Women*] for granted,[7]" this effect is doubled in *Little Men*, which deploys boredom as a weapon with its episodic, repetitive, dull snapshots of daily life. The inverted role modeling of *Little Men* is designed to be taken for granted, and shows, by encouraging its audiences' disinterest, the failure of the implied 'happy ending' of the marriage plot. The continued insistence on happiness at folding laundry, chasing boys though bath time and bedtime, planning meals and running to market feel increasingly insincere as the novel continues. Drudgery, insofar as it insists on the opposite of the effect that it creates, is the counter point to *Little Women's* depiction of queer desire. Queer readings of the novel have been particularly dedicated to Jo, whose rejection of traditional modes of femininity, particularly that of a romantic impetus for the marriage plot, but also to Beth, whose death makes her the only March sister who is able to escape the constraints of what it means to grow into womanhood. Roberta Trites argues that Beth's death "frees Alcott to explore the homoeroticism without alarming any Victorian censors" and that "Beth dies not to uphold the passivity of the Cult of True Womanhood [as is often assumed in feminist readings of the book], but to veil the lesbianism fueling the novel."[8] Readings on Jo's queer desire for her sister often then circle around to speculations about Alcott's own erotic attachments, citing her lifelong spinsterhood, her loving, romantic descriptions of women in her life, and the connection between author and character to make these assessments. Certainly, Jo's marriage is, at the very least, a farce of heterosexual desire; Friedreich Bhaer is more father, colleague, and editor than he ever becomes a lover, and even when readers see him as Jo's husband in *Little Men*, little sexual or romantic intimacy seems to have developed between the two.

Readers—whether scholars looking deeply at the text's homoerotic subtext or more casual admirers of the novel, who have long disdained or ignored the ending of *Little Women*—do not have to stretch to see that the Bhaers' marriage is not one of love but of cultural coercion at least on Jo's side and possibly on Frederich's as well, given that he 'falls in love' with Jo the writer rather than Jo the woman. Bhaer first discusses his interest in Jo after reading her poem "In the Garret" and imagining himself in its lines. The poem is revealed to the readers in this moment as Jo presumably reads it over at Bhaer's instruction that "there was one little verse that spoke to me. Read and find him."[9] Bhaer's introduction as romantic partner is thus intertwined with his position as a distinctly paternalistic teacher, as he sets Jo to an analytical reading of her own poem, and an arguably queer figure as he identifies with a poem that is essentially a love letter to sisterhood. Bhaer thus simultaneously presses Jo into a masculinized position—she must take on the position of the reader, who Bhaer assumes, as the object of a love poem written by a woman, to be male, to find the verse (also masculine, per Bhaer's 'him') that would speak to this male reader-cum-love object—and feminizes himself in his identification with the poem—presumably, as Doyle notes, in the stanza that is dedicated to Jo herself. The Bhaers' marriage is thus a farce of heterosexual desire and a parody of the conversion narrative: in finding 'love' over a dedicated misreading of a queer love poem, Jo and Bhaer discover an option between the literary spinsterhood that Jo vows to maintain and the love marriages of the Marches and the Brookes, that of practical, scholarly, queer marriage. If romantic love were not simply *a* problem with heterosexual marriage, if it were the *entire* problem, then the Bhaers' model would seem ideal. Indeed, feminist scholars have looked at Jo's choice in a drab, old, utterly sexless husband as a form of resistance: by choosing an intellectual partnership over a

romantic attachment, Jo is able to keep the economic and social protections of marriage (and Alcott is able to keep her publishing contract) without the emotional constraints that make marriage untenable. At the end of *Little Women*, this may seem like an appealing option—certainly a more appealing one than weeping over misbehaving twin children or death—and one that has tempted scholars working to find redeeming feminist values in the matrimonial plots of *Good Wives*. But it doesn't work, of course, because the idea that marriage is only a matter of emotion is one of the central deceptions of the marriage plot.

Doyle asks, "Why is it, in spite of the fact that [*Little Women*] famously imagines for young women a choice between marriage or death (an uninhabitable choice between submission and disappearance), that reading *Little Women* is nevertheless cited by generations of women as a key moment in their own self-production, *not* as 'good wives' but as, in Adrienne Rich's words, '*marriage re-sist[ers]*'? It is a fine example of a novel that seems to say one thing (in asking its women character's to give up their attachments to women), and does another (by offering women readers a manual on how to maintain them). The novel's social impact, in other words, is completely at odds with the trajectory of its plot."[10] Doyle uses this question to focus a reading of the legible lesbianism in a text written in an era in which lesbian identity did not exist, arguing for a form of dialectical criticism that "might refuse the relentlessly temporal logic of plot" and allow for an understanding of "the dissonance between *Little Women's* plot and *Little Women*'s effects."[11] She continues to read the queer attachments in the deeply romantic elegies that Jo writes to Beth, as "a narrative break, a diversion *from* the plot's trajectory."[12] Legible queer attachments, for Doyle, can be found in the places where the plot is disrupted, in which readers are reminded that the apparent simplicity of the novel obscures its deeper

meaning, that, like with poetry, we must look deeper for meaning. The conflict between plot and meaning is exacerbated in *Little Men*, in which surface simplicity is extended into banality, and in which the relentlessness of plot is rarely disrupted (not only by formal devices like the insertion of poetry, but by imaginative possibilities created by character). But the inescapability is the point: either readers are trapped in the mundanity of motherhood along with Jo, or they set aside the book, and Jo March's afterlife as Jo Bhaer is cut short. In either case, this is a point made possible only by the serial form. Readers who have loved independent, tomboyish Jo cannot dismiss her out of hand, cannot easily blame her for (somehow—a trap of gender expectation) the terms of her own disappointment—for Jo Bhaer goes through all the motions of loving her life. It is the readers' disappointment at stake in *Little Men*, and when this disappointment occurs even for Jo, a beloved girlhood character, and even in her marriage to Bhaer, which is rooted in intellectual compatibility rather than emotion, it stands that the if problem with marriage is not the wife (again, somehow, on the dichotomy of being too Pollyanna-ish vs not trying hard enough) and it is not a matter of failing to simply have the right feelings, then perhaps the problem is marriage itself. If Jo's best-case fourth option (better than falling in love, better than impoverished spinsterhood, better than death) is still bad, then what?

Yet, while it is possible to read *Little Men* as documenting the ways in which heteronormative marriage structures harm queer women, it would be limiting to suggest that the novel portrays marriage as a disappointment exclusively to queer women. Marriage is perhaps, in this framing, not even *particularly* disappointing to women who, as with Jo, married without the expectation of romantic love. As Meg March learns at the end of *Little Women,* the worst part of marriage is having a husband; when her jelly won't jell,

feelings of domestic ineptitude drive her to tears, but it is Brooke's arrival with an unexpected friend in tow that inspire "mingled indignation, reproach, and dismay."[13] Brooke's reaction is first irritated and defensive, but manages to control his temper, only to, worse, make a joke:

> "Don't cry, dear, but just exert yourself a little bit, and knock us up something to eat. We're both as hungry as hunters, so we sha'n't mind what it is. Give us the cold meat, the bread and cheese; we won't ask for jelly."
>
> He meant it as a good-natured joke; but that one word sealed his fate. Meg thought it was *too* cruel to hint about her failure, and the last atom of patience vanished as he spoke.
>
> "You must get yourself out of the scrape as you can; I'm too used up to 'exert' myself for any one. It's like a man to propose a bone and vulgar bread and cheese for company. I won't have anything of the sort in my house. Take that Scott up to mother's, and tell him I'm away, sick, dead,--anything."[14]

Though it lacks anger, Brooke's response is dismissive, unsympathetic, and self-aggrandizing. In instructing Meg not to cry but to "just exert [herself] a little bit" and "[knock up] something," he suggests that her mood can be cured by mitigating the way in which she has supposedly failed her husband. This suggestion both elevates and denigrates domestic labor. If essential domestic tasks like producing dinner can simply be 'knocked up,' then such tasks must be perceptibly simple, undeserving of Meg's tears. She ought, per her husband's framing, be happy to provide dinner, irrespective of what such a provision may look like. Yet Brooke, who has just experienced dismay at the unwelcoming effect produced by a locked front door, is not unaware of the nuances of performed domesticity. His description of himself and Scott as "hungry as hunters" invokes an image of archetypal masculinity that demands its needs be met. Instead of soothing Meg with the assurance that a simple meal will suffice, this metaphor highlights how Meg has failed at the domestic contract. Her hunter-husband has provided while she has failed to prepare. Worse, he wishes to expose this failure and the resultant broader dissolution of the illusion that Meg

achieves domestic idyll effortlessly and consistently. His suggestion is therefore indeed "like a man" who has learned to undervalue household labor while relying on the products of those labors. And yet, despite her frustrations, Meg, albeit to a lesser degree, performs the same move as her husband; though she initially tells Brooke to "get [himself] out of the scrape as [he] can," in short order she passes the responsibility of feeding Brooke and Scott on to her mother, whom, Meg assumes, will have a prepared meal that is suitable for two unexpected guests. Her own experiences with marriage have not disrupted Meg's image of her mother as domestic provider, nor, it thus seems, led her to question the expectations of the ideal wife.

The ruptured image of perfect domesticity is contrasted with the description with which Alcott begins her "Domestic Experiences" chapter, in which Meg and Brooke's determination to have a 'happy marriage' is documented. Meg is convinced that her husband "should find home a paradise, he should always see a smiling face, should fare sumptuously every day, and never know the loss of a button."[15] These plans prove impractical, and Meg, who works "with more energy than discretion" finds herself "too tired, sometimes, even to smile" and begins to scale back her domestic efforts ever so slightly. Despite this, the narrative insists, the Brookes remain "very happy, even after they [discover] that they couldn't live on love alone."[16] Meg's frustration on the day when her jelly won't jell is therefore not a singular event, but a final straw in the pile of marital disappointments that wear away at her domestic expectations. While marriage is, in an Alcott novel, the problem, expectations about marriage are also the problem; choosing to believe, or wanting to believe, or needing to believe in the 'happy marriage' narrative is a certain way to end up unhappy. Marriage, Alcott posits, is, at best, an economic proposition

and, even then, is a bad economic proposition for women. The wearing down that happens in a practical marriage, as with the subsuming of all the qualities that made Jo March a quintessential girlhood heroine into an unrecognizable Mother Bhaer, is compounded in the Brookes' marriage by virtue of their romantic expectations. The messy, tedious, quotidian expectations of marriage and motherhood are not romantic, and gradual disillusionment does not make for a compelling narrative, and so Meg, the most marriage-minded of the March sisters, ends up erased from *Little Men*.

Little Women does not, however, present the flat expectation that domestic experiences are always or unerringly wearing; indeed, it does not even necessarily suggest that domestic failures always need be a source of misery. In the "Experiments" chapter earlier in the novel, the girls, wishing for a vacation, are granted permission for a week without work. In short order, the household devolves into a "peculiar and uncomfortable state" despite Marmee and Hannah's efforts to make up for the girls' lost labor.[17] On the last day of the experiment, Marmee, "who had a good deal of humour," gives both Hannah and herself the day off.[18] Initially, worn down by the burden of relentless leisure, the girls are delighted to have tasks, but quickly find themselves unequal to the demands of running a household. Meg and Jo present Marmee with an inedible breakfast, which she receives with good humor before secretly exchanging it for her own prepared meal. The younger sisters are less tactful, however, and Meg and Jo begin to quarrel; once they rearrange the division of labor, though, they become convinced again of their own domestic prowess and elect to host a dinner party. Despite their confidence, circumstances rapidly decline: Jo plans an excessively ambitious menu; Beth discovers that, in ignoring her chores, she has also neglected to feed her bird, Pip, who is now dead; Marmee leaves to go visiting; and, worst

of all, elderly and unpleasant Miss Crocker arrives, announcing that she has come for dinner. The dinner is, naturally, disastrous, with each dish ill-prepared in various ways, culminating in a dessert of strawberries and cream—with the strawberries dressed in salt, instead of sugar, and the cream gone sour. Viewed as a series of events, the mounting pile of domestic disasters that the young March sisters create is more significant than Meg's isolated failure to produce sufficiently jelled jelly. Yet despite the comparative magnitude of Jo's childhood culinary mishaps—and despite the comparatively worse intentions of the girls, who first peevishly complain about chores and then hubristically insist that domestic work is no work at all—the abortive jelly looms far more significantly in the novel as a disappointment. The sisters' spoilt dinner becomes, almost instantly, a beloved family joke:

> [Jo] turned scarlet and was on the verge of crying, when she met Laurie's eyes, which would look merry in spite of his heroic efforts. The comical side of the affair suddenly struck her, and she laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks. So did everyone else, even 'Croaker' as the girls called the old lady, and the unfortunate dinner ended gaily, with bread and butter, olives and fun.[19]

Expectation and reaction structure the differences between these two moments. Lofty though her culinary goals may have been, Jo turns to cooking her elaborate spread as a known amateur, a girl with childish aspirations with aims to sidestep the trap that Marmee has set to teach her daughters a lesson. When her meal proves disastrous, neither reader nor Jo nor even sour Miss Crocker is particularly surprised. Jo is, after all, a proto-woman, a little woman, in the process of learning how to become a proper adult; unlike the more overtly evangelical novels of the era, Alcott's text does not present idealized, perfect children, ready-made in miniature-adult form, but rather fallible children who often find the movement into adulthood messy. The lesson Mrs. March teaches, we see, is best learned through failure, which makes failure in and of itself a form of accomplishment.

If Meg's future mishaps indicate that domesticity is hard, Jo's sour cream demonstrates that *learning* domesticity is hard. The distinction between these two is separated by the hard line of the marriage plot. Marriage, an ending disguised as a beginning, delineates the time when a girl is meant to be fully acculturated as a domestic figure; regardless of what shaped her life before marriage, she is, after the wedding, expected to be ready to transition from student to teacher, ready to oversee the domestic sphere with apparent effortlessness, so that she may soon teach her own daughters the same lesson. This expectation is reflected in the reactions of the men who witness Meg and Jo's respective culinary failures. Laurie begins the group's laughter in "Experiments," trivializing the error and enabling the women at the table, for whom the domestic arts are, by necessity, a serious matter, to similarly see the comedy in a meal so badly botched. Brooke, however, moves to soothe Meg, reinforcing the perceived severity of her error while minimizing and dismissing her efforts. Though Jo's expected neophyte status saves her from censure at failure, both these scenes reveal the frustrating contradiction of domestic labor: it is both serious and unimportant, demanded and expected while existing beneath the notice of men. A failed dinner is both a single dinner and an assessment of domestic ability, which is to say of wifeliness, which is to say of womanhood. The woman's sphere is hers only until a man notices and ascribes meaning, and when success and experience are expected, only failure is noted. Thus, in "Domestic Experiences," Meg's "love, energy, and cheerfulness [brought to her] work" is immediately overshadowed by "some obstacles."[20] Her successful efforts to impress cause troubles. Her failed efforts to impress cause troubles.

Marmee, compared to her daughters, experiences relative tranquility and domestic success, largely because her husband is notably absent. Mr. March is gone, but his absence

from the household looms little over the narrative; aside from its influence on the Marches' poverty, or the moments where his letters arrive, Mr. March's absence is not persistently at the fore of the girls' minds. Even when he is injured and the household worries for his life, the bulk of the narrative energy goes to the ways in which the women of the family respond to disaster. The most memorable moment from this portion of the novel is when Jo cuts off her hair for twenty-five dollars. The reaction of her mother and sisters when Jo reveals her crop is presented in a chorus, each voice neither clearly identified nor entirely opaque: '"Your hair! Your beautiful hair!" "Oh, Jo, how could you? Your one beauty." "My dear girl, there was no need of this." "She doesn't look like my Jo any more, but I love her dearly for it!"'[21] While Jo positions the loss of her hair as a reasonable sacrifice that she must make in order to be an equitable provider with Meg and her mother—already a masculinizing move according to nineteenth century domestic politics—the narrative immediately notes that losing her hair—something of her body and not her body itself—is unnecessary. It is a moment of flail in the novel, in which Jo does something drastic and necessary, and she is rebuffed by the reminder that nobody asked her to do this. Much scholarship has discussed Jo March's queer tendencies, counting the chopping off her hair as an assertion of tomboyishness in which boyishness is not only an embodied state, but is also articulated through the position of a proto-provider. The moment of self-assertion—Jo's reminder to herself and her family that, at least for a little while longer, she is the man of the household—is met with a correction. She has misread the situation, not necessarily in cutting her hair, but in asking her family to be grateful for it. And so, even as Jo performs such masculinizing posturing, she is compelled to balance it out with feminine moralizing to avoid the shame of having her grand gesture be so ridiculed. When the economic value of

her hair is overshadowed by her mother and sisters' dismay, Jo adds a moral interpretation: "It will be good for my vanity, I was getting too proud of my wig."[22] This is a moment of gender confusion, in a household that stands on the cusp of returning to comparative heteronormativity and, given the acculturating role of the sentimental girlhood novel, a moment of genre confusion that reveals some of the allowances that Alcott's novel makes in answering the question of what it means to grow up into (and out of) girlhood. If *Little Women* tells the story of girls learning what it means to become women, this scene also hints at how a boy learning to become a man may also be a lesson of loss; in Alcott's novel, the ways in which 'growing up' is equivalent to acculturating oneself to an appropriate adult gender signify the loss of queer childhood's potential for expansiveness.

II. Changing Roles of Characters and the Utility of Bad Sequels

Scholars have long debated various 'turning points' in *Little Women*, moments when the idyll of childhood is ruptured and the difficult realities of adulthood intrude. Beth's death and Meg's marriage serve as clearly marked instances in this development, particularly insofar as they are related to Jo's progression from tomboy to teacher to wife. The shift that occurs when the March family regains its (dubious) patriarch, however, is as significant in altering the novel's optimistic domesticity. By the time Mr. March returns, the novel's most charming scenes of domestic tranquility have largely passed, and though the March father is largely a nonentity in the March family narrative—he is more present in the narrative when he is absent than after he returns from war—he is still capable of disrupting the success a household can have when it is run by women. A husband is required for a woman to form her own household, but he is also the thing that disrupts the successful running of

that household. A 'true' patriarch, even a failed one, is always preferable to a woman playacting at one, no matter how much more efficient she may be. For a tomboy like Jo—or even for a wife, like Abigail Alcott or Marmee, who have been given just enough time to experience autonomy over their lives and family to know what it means to lose it—this means a displacement. Mr. March's return marks a point in the novel in which the little women must learn how to manage the ways in which they are meant to feel against the ways they actually feel—a demand that applies to Alcott's readers as much as her characters. Alcott plays into the limitations of the marriage plot by indulging in its disappointments and by glossing over its joys—while steadfastly insisting on the party line of happy compulsory heterosexuality. The more time spent while Meg extols the supposed virtues of John Brooke, the longer Jo engages in her courtship of the lackluster Frederich Bhaer, the more the novel loses its momentum. Even Amy's relationship with Laurie (the sole man in the novel who is given something of a chance to develop a personality) feels slow, regardless of the individual reader's perspective as to whether or not Laurie is marrying the wrong sister. The longer the sisters spend apart, the more time they spend learning to be good wives rather than little women, the more the novel disappoints, the more it drifts to its anticlimactic ending.

As far as potential for serialization goes, *Little Women* ends exceedingly poorly; with all the March sisters married or dead—two states that have approximately the same narrative potential—the novels' various heroines are constrained by the cultural prescription that they have no story left to tell. For readers to even desire more—to even believe that there is more story to be told, once each sister is safely settled into heterosexual boredom—speaks not only to the wonder of Alcott's writing, but to the capacity of children's literature

to function as its own separate category of storytelling. By the time of *Little Women*'s publication in 1867, Jacob Abbott's *Girls* Series had been well established for over twenty years, as had Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' *Kitty Brown* books. Serialization was already written into the code of children's literature enough to be expected, in both of the meanings of serial publication: child readers were primed to expect novels released in parts as well as narratives to be crafted into separate volumes. Depending on how we track the publication of *Little Women* and *Good Wives* (which, since the publication of the latter, have traditionally be treated as one volume in American publications, but two in British counterparts), Alcott's novel can be counted as either or both and, in either case, would have encouraged contemporary readers to at least welcome the possibility of more. Expectations of genre thus come up against expectations of narrative at the conclusion. Is *Little Women* a children's novel, in which endless sequels may allow characters to have aimless adventures well after any clear markers of linear growth, or a women's novel, in which the marriage plot is *the* plot, and in which marriage is a narrative full stop?

The clear answer, of course, is that *Little Women* is both, but its singularity as both is written into its critical history. *Little Women* occupies a rare position as pertains to the ways that it has been claimed by both traditions of children's and women's literature. To be certain, these are both fields that have had to battle for legibility in the broader literary sphere, though women's literature, thanks to decades of work by feminist scholars, has gained a certain higher respectability as 'serious' literature than has its counterpart for children. Even so, *Little Women* is treated, among women's novels, as among the greats of the nineteenth century, and thus has garnered scholarly attention that is only rivaled by select other Great Novels of sentimentality and has enjoyed popular attention unmatched

by any other novel of its time. As a children's novel, it stands essentially alone as a candidate in the (capital-L) Literary canon. Yet to view Alcott's novel as solely an example of women's fiction or solely one of children's fiction limits examination of what Alcott is able to accomplish on the cusp of two genres. Nina Baym's assessment of Alcott in her now-classic *Women's Fiction* hints at the gaps revealed by boxing *Little Women* into a single genre. Baym cites the publication of *Little Women* as "[marking] the decline of women's fiction as we have studied it, because [it represents] the transformation of woman's fiction into girl's fiction. The story of feminine heroism now becomes didactic instrument for little girls."[23] Baym identifies, though is dismissive of, Alcott's ability to work between these two modes, and offers little consideration to Alcott's inversion of didacticism into a cautionary tale than following the traditional 'role model' approach of many of the other popular girls' novels of the era. Unlike in a more transparently educational novel, Alcott uses the serial form to introduce elements that bring her narrative further and further away from the original feel of her characters. Serialization rejects the form of the women's novel, yet Alcott's particular version of serialization also rejects the form of the girlhood series. It is a serial but not, the marriage plot but not.

Alcott's sequels thus play in a space between genre, seriality, character, and the creation of publics around her texts in a manner that cultivates the disappointment of her readers. David Brewer argues that nineteenth century readers often "imagine characters as common, and hence available to the public, also imagine themselves as part of a public" in which their unifying feature is a desire for 'more.'[24] Characters, to readers, are real, and their 'lives' before and after the text can be easily imagined to exist. And Alcott's public made themselves known; between the publication of *Little Women* and *Good Wives*, Alcott

fielded scores of letters begging her to pair Jo with Laurie. Alcott's correspondence documents her desire to thwart these desires "out of perversity": "I won't marry Jo to Laurie to please anyone" and so "made a funny match" for Jo.[25] Alcott, in her journals, likewise noted the relationship of this 'perversity' to the marriage plot: "Girls ask to write who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman's life."[26] Despite this complaint, all the living little women *do* marry, albeit in ways that infuriated Alcott's readers (both contemporary and hence) and stymied her characters' potential for development. In writing more, then, Alcott offers an imaginative public less of Jo March.

In the shift from *Little Women* to *Little Men*, Jo (and to an even more dramatic extent, Meg and Amy) shifts from being a protagonist to what Nikolajeva refers to as a 'satellite' character, a move that disrupts the attachment of readers—or at least disorients the sense of whom they are 'supposed' to attach to. Training in seriality means that the central characters are meant to remain central, and that the girl character onto which girl readers can project themselves must remain a suitable (and desirable) object of attachment. But training in genre means that wives and mothers, figures defined by their relationship to others rather than a sense of selfhood, are not such figures, do not offer a central position to which readers can attach themselves to become engaged in the narrative. Nikolajeva's term 'satellite' emerges as being particularly apt, in this case: Mrs. Jo, Mother Bhaer, orbits the narrative, shifting into focus only when she is needed by the 'little men.' Thus readers, who have developed their attachments to Jo, are pulled in separate directions by character, plot, serial, and genre. The disorientation caused by the loss of a central character into the periphery is intensified because *Little Men* does not offer a satisfying replacement as a main character. The novel opens with the arrival of Nat Blake, but Nat does not take up enough of

the narrative to serve as a main character in the way he might in a school novel, in which one student becomes the focus and classmates remain in the background. Rather, the novel adheres to the format of the domestic novel, which demands that in a proper, sentimental household, each child is an individual, to be loved equally. The list of characters is expansive: Nat and Dan arrive at Plumfield, where ten students already reside, including Franz and Emil, Bhaer's nephews. There are Daisy and Demi, Meg's children, and Rob and Teddy, Jo's children. Tomboy Nan arrives and falls into a childhood romance with Tommy. Nikolajeva writes, "a common attitude to children's books is that they must not contain too many secondary characters, since young readers cannot remember them and distinguish between them. As compared with many mainstream novels […] children's books tend to contain relatively few characters."[27] The problem with the deluge of new characters is *Little Men* is not necessarily with child readers, but rather with each character's troubled status between primary and secondary. Each of the Plumfield students is too distinct to be interchangeable, but too interchangeable to be entirely distinct. Their problems, concerns, and stories overlap. They comprise a class being treated as a family, a school being treated as a home. There are, simply, too many children—too many for any one mother to care for, too many for the domestic novel to hold, too many for any one of them to emerge as a satisfying protagonist. Individuality becomes a paradox; by asking her readers to care for all the characters, Alcott makes it near impossible to care for any of them. Keeping them straight becomes labor—in an already laborious novel—of itself, and leaves the serial without a center to hold on to. Without a unifying character, the plot loses focus and lacks momentum. If *Little Women* offers an immersive reading experience—which, given the ongoing fervor of Alcott's public in the century and a half since its publication, history

seems to clearly suggest—*Little Men* offers a disorienting one, in which girl readers are drawn into trying to find enjoyment in a world that puts their identities second; in a masterful twist of irony, Alcott gives her readers precisely what they demand, an aim that does put an end to their lives as (central) characters—a point most clearly made by her refusal to end the series.

The implied aftermath of the marriage plot is exploded in scope by making Jo schoolmistress-cum-mother, and even the potential pleasures of motherhood—of watching individual children, in whom one has an emotional investment, grow and develop—is washed away in the sheer interchangeability of the crowd of boys at Plumfield. The only children who are remotely distinct are Meg's twins, and even they are presented more frequently as foils to Jo (Daisy, representative of the need to create appropriately-gendered entertainment) or to the other boys (Demi, the model student). Jo's own baby is more an accessory than anything else. Thus, the children are neither satisfying subjects of a novel nor satisfying objects of maternal love. They are plot devices—of a staggeringly uninteresting plot. Nor is Jo herself satisfyingly presented as a character. She is, after all, "Mother Bhaer," a figure defined by her relationship to others. A mother, Alcott tells us, is not a character, not a person. So long as she is forced to fill her role according to what is socially legible (and, insofar as social legibility translates to narratability, this legibility is more as a conceptualized figure than a woman), a mother is not her own woman, perhaps not even inside her own mind so long as she is determined to love her children. Thus, unlike the robust imaginative landscape that *Little Women* offers, *Little Men* is a shell in which intellectual work is replaced with labor and imaginative play is replaced with physical activity, both on the part of the children and on that of the adults.

The crux of *Little Men*'s bad efficacy comes specifically from collapsing of character into object, the movement from a good novel into a bad one. Taking Jo March—not merely any character, but one of the most beloved characters in all of American literature—and flattening her into Mother Bhaer presents, to readers, not only boredom, but loss. Originally published in 1871, three years after *Little Women* and two years after *Good Wives, Little Men* arrived to an audience of girls that had ravenously consumed the first two volumes of the March sisters' saga. This readership was familiar with the previous installments and included thousands of girls who had written thousands of letters to Alcott, reacting to the story, offering their opinions, and begging for more, especially on the topic of Jo, Laurie, and the dissatisfying marriage to Bhaer. Only the third of these subjects would be readdressed in the sequel. *Little Men* uses mundanity as a tool of radicality; the difference between vivacious, impetuous, brash, sometimes unkind Jo March and patient, conscientious, diligent, kindhearted Jo Bhaer makes a point about the marriage plot that neither novel is capable of doing on its own. What marriage and motherhood means for women, Alcott contends, as an ending of one's story is indeed *the* ending of the self as self and the beginning, not of some idyllic, happy, imagined life, but of the constant refiguring of the self as defined by its relationship to others. *Little Men* thus exists exclusively as a sequel—a bad sequel.

III. Bronson Alcott and Friedrich Bhaer: Pedagogy at Plumfield

Even all the early feminist leanings in *Little Women* are not quite as succinct on this point. While the notion of whether or not Alcott's most famous novel is 'really' feminist has been argued over, *Little Women* evidently portrays a world in which men and marriage are entirely secondary to the lives and development of women. Mr. March is essentially

scenery: he has mismanaged the family's money and now is gone off to war, functioning as a talisman for the girls to worry over occasionally (though far more infrequently than might be expected, given where he has gone). When he is injured, Mr. March functions as a suitable reason for the girls to demonstrate the ways in which they are capable of surviving on their own, without the immediate supervision of their mother. Even once he returns, Mr. March is something of a non-entity in the March household; the women, we gather, have become accustomed enough to managing without their father and husband that his presence is entirely extraneous.

Unlike *Little Men, Little Women* does considerable work towards disrupting the 'perfect mother' image. Marmee, unlike the idealized sentimental mother that pervaded domestic literature in the nineteenth century, is a frequently absent, largely hands-off mother. Certainly, Alcott includes a few idyllic scenes between the March matriarch and her daughters; the moment where Marmee and her four little women gather around to read aloud a letter from Mr. March is iconic enough to often be included in promotional stills for adaptations of the novel. This is, however, something of an outlier in *Little Women*. Rather, the sisters largely entertain themselves and each other, creating communal forms of play such as the Pickwick Club or attending each to their individual arts: Jo's writing, Beth's piano playing, Amy's painting. Marmee is there in the novel, but also sometimes not; she appears when she can, and when needed, to dispense motherly advice and gentle guidance. Despite these frequent absences, Marmee is not portrayed as lacking in any way. As Jo says, towards the end of the novel, "Mothers are the *best* lovers in the world."[28] *Little Women* thus does considerable work towards imagining a mother as a person, towards functioning as a tribute towards her mother, Abigail, known as Abba, who essentially single-handedly

kept the Alcott household functioning during most of Alcott's childhood.

As a woman who worked diligently to attain the financial security that would allow her to decline to marry, Alcott shies away from romanticizing the work of a wife and mother. Beyond that, however, the experiences of her childhood left her with an acute awareness of what it meant to be married to an idealist. In her journals, Alcott documents the trials that the Alcott family suffered due to Bronson Alcott's rigid adherence to his moral values. Life under Bronson's utopic strictures meant that the Alcott family was held to a strict vegetarian diet, and were neither permitted to wear wool, because it came from sheep, nor cotton, because it was produced under exploited slave labor. This left Abba Alcott and her daughters clad only in linen, which made survival of bitter Massachusetts winters a precarious proposition. To add insult to injury, Bronson was often absent during these hard times; at various points in Alcott's childhood, her father would go on multi-year speaking tours and would return to his struggling family having made no profit at all in his time away. Perhaps even worse, Bronson seemed to have no sense of the pain that poverty caused his family; Alcott recounts an episode in which Bronson, sent to town with his wife's hard-won money to purchase Abba a much-needed shawl, returned with a book, instead, having forgotten his errand altogether. With severely limited possibilities for employment, Abigail Alcott was left reliant on charity, though it stung her pride. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, would hide money in the Alcott's home when he visited Bronson so that Abba would be able to afford to feed her children. If the economy of the Alcott household was ever successful, it succeeded without Bronson, and indeed often because of his lack of involvement. When Louisa turned to writing for money, it was because she had long lived in a household in desperate need of it.

Though the circumstances in the Alcott home were untenable, Abigail remained loyal to her husband, refusing to leave him even when her brother, Samuel May, begged her to take her daughters and return to Boston. But, despite the mess that their marriage had become, Bronson and Abba had initially started as an extremely happy match, one that not only involved great affection but also the meeting of minds. Abba Alcott genuinely believed in the causes her husband espoused; but, as a woman, a wife, and a mother, lacked the luxury of Bronson's detachment from the practical realities of life. As a result, as Alcott noted in her journals, Abba became increasingly bitter, worn down by the struggles of her daily life as well as the stark difference between where her marriage had ended up and where it had started. Alcott thus grew up surrounded by the dual knowledge that marriage, as a state, is inherently harder on women than on men, and that marrying for love adds danger in that its potential for disappointment is dramatically exacerbated. The coincidence of romantic love and marriage, Alcott would learn from her parents' marriage, is a dangerous pitfall that distracts from the consideration of economics as the central concern in marriage. For women, the safest option is economic independence and spinsterhood; if one must marry, a practical marriage is best. For Alcott's *characters*, however, this message becomes more complicated given the constraints placed on the writer by the marriage plot and the romantic expectations of a readership.

The journals of the Alcott family reveal their dual modes of thinking about Bronson's idealism. On one hand, Abigail, daughter of the well-to-do, intellectual Boston May family, married Bronson because of his utopic vision and his commitment to living out his values. After their first meeting, Abba, then a twenty-seven-year-old spinster visiting her brother, described Bronson as "an intelligent, philosophic modest man, whose reserved deportment

authorized my showing many attentions." [29] The pair established a friendship that centered on their mutual reformist values; Abigail wished to work as Bronson's assistant when he took up a position at the Salem Street primary school, and only abandoned the idea when her brother, Samuel May, advised that it would not be appropriate for an unmarried woman to work so closely with an unmarried man. It was Abba, who has been framed by many of Bronson's contemporary biographers as a harping naysayer who distracted her husband from his philosophies with petty domestic concerns, who introduced Bronson to the May's circle of Boston intellects. Abba and Bronson grew closer, though Abigal's description of her husband-to-be in a letter to her brother Samuel—"I do think him in every respect qualified to make me happy. He is moderate, I am impetuous—He is prudent and humble—I am forward and arbitrary. He is poor—but we are both industrious—why may we not be happy?"—stands out in stark opposition to the life that would she would find herself living.[30] Abba, who found herself, after their marriage, relentlessly dragged along with her husband's lofty impracticalities, grew impatient with his disregard for earthly concerns, though she rarely expressed this dissatisfaction to those outside the family. Abba, in one such expression of complaint, wrote, "I do wish people who carry their heads in the clouds would occasionally take their bodies with them."[31] The ways in which his commitment to idealism made him a commercial failure that left him in a state of perpetual material want did not appear to bother Bronson, though these same qualities would dictate the day-to-day lives of his wife and daughters as they moved from place to place, took paid positions that necessitated that the family live separately, making each move with the stresses of poverty relentlessly haunting Alcott women. Despite the troubles caused by her father, Alcott remained admiring of his views though not blinded to his

faults, frequently portraying an idealized version of his projects and values in her novels.

Rather than focusing on Abba's independence and the struggle of raising a household of girls without any tangible masculine support in a patriarchal world, *Little Men* reimagines Bronson Alcott's ideal education system, washed clean of any of the earthly concerns that made these ideals such a misery for his family. *Little Men* does not discuss the acquisition of or need for an income; any economic concerns happen between the boys as they trade pennies for their various fledgling skills. The idyll of Plumfield is focused on an idealized education system that not only encourages boys to love learning, but to be assured that they are loved by their teachers, as well. The emergent educational ethos is thus not about specific accomplishments or even necessarily habits of studying; when Nat insists that he "*must* work hard, or [he won't] catch up with the others [who] know heaps," Mr. Bhaer tells him not to work so hard, that he "will tire [himself] out, and there is time enough."[32] Bhaer lists for Nat the lessons he *does* know— though the Plumfield newcomer may not know arithmetic, he knows how to keep his temper and play the violin—and Demi Brooke promises to defend Nat if any of the other boys try to laugh at him, prompting Mr. Bhaer to re-orient his lesson:

> Thinking that a lesson in learning to help one another was better than arithmetic just then, Mr. Bhaer told them about Nat, making such and interesting and touching little story out of it that the good-hearted lands all promised to lend him a hand, and felt quite honoured to be called upon to impart their stores of wisdom to the chap […] This appeal established the right of feeling among them.[33]

Education at Plumfield is dependent on community work with Mr. Bhaer figured as a guide who shapes experiences rather than a strict authority. Neither the boys' lack of attention on a certain topic nor Demi's outburst is fashioned as a detractor from education but rather a contribution to a different type of education, one where character is more

important than sums. Such a consideration of education—not just as learning but as being brought up right—brings a sense of the girlhood novel into what is, overwhelmingly, a book about boys, albeit with a different sense of stakes. Marmee's modeling of a moral education takes up the bulk of teaching of the March sisters in *Little Women*; readers arrive on the scene to find Jo already an avid writer and Beth already a practiced musician, and the sisters develop further through literary play such as The Pickwick Club rather than through hours spent sitting in classrooms. Amy's experience with the candied limes paints school not as a site of learning but one of disappointment and schoolroom scenes quickly give way to the domestic. But Plumfield is both school and home and so every domestic scene is also one of learning, and every classroom is a space of sentimental, idealized domesticity. It is, for the boys who live there, a perfect canvas, untouched by the troubles of the outside world. There, the boys need not fear the beatings that Nat's father doled out—indeed, Mr. Bhaer teaches Jack not to lie by forcing the boy to strike him, a reversal of the ire of Amy's teacher that appears far more effective at curing bad habits—nor hunger nor poverty. Dinner is always wholesome and filling, beds are always soft, and baths are always hot. Self-development is the sole question to which the boys must apply themselves.

What the idealistic view of a moral education for boys elides, however, is an awful lot of *work*. This work is, naturally, women's work, and the novel is endlessly drawn back to the drudgery of domestic labor that is required to keep Plumfield running. Jo frequently haunts the background of scenes, tending to one domestic chore or another, unnoticed; at other times, she ostentatiously "[takes] no notice" of a misbehaving child only to just happen to let them overhear the precise thing they need to hear to make them sorry for their actions.[34] Passivity is another tool for childrearing, one that indicates how consuming

mothering is 'meant' to be. To add to Jo's work, Daisy Brooke is the sole little girl living at Plumfield; when she is excluded from the boys' antics on the grounds that "girls can't play football," amusing her falls to Jo.[35] Jo offers to take her to return to live with Meg, her mother, but Daisy "can't get on without [her] Demi" and insists on being allowed to continue to live at the school.[36] Jo suggests that Daisy play alone, but Daisy is tired of doing so: "'I wish you'd make up a new play for me, Aunty Jo,' said Daisy, swinging listlessly on the door."[37] These demands, met with endless patience, occur while Jo is "whisking piles of linen into a wardrobe with great rapidity" and contriving "a good way in which to dispose of the little hindrance for a time."[38] When Daisy leaves to go assist the cook in the baking of gingersnaps, "Mrs. Bhaer [is] much relieved, for sometimes the one little girl was harder to amuse than the dozen boys."[39] Jo's relief, however, is short lived; she must plan for the girl's continual need for diversion. Thus, "while she worked, Aunt Jo racked her brain for a new play,"[40] eventually devising a game that, as Meg describes it on a visit, is "'a most useful and interesting one, and it is very kind of her to play it with you, because she does not like it very well herself.'"[41] Jo's work, then, pursuant to the contentedness and development of children (and contentedness as a prerequisite for the development of children) exists in multiple, simultaneous layers: not only are her hands busy with the domestic work of the household, but her mind is busy with developing play—and, specifically, play she does not enjoy herself—as a method to simultaneously distract and improve her niece, for whom she is serving as de facto mother. And all this must occur so that the boys can be free to go about their activities unencumbered by any of the preoccupations of femininity, including the mere presence of little girls, who are only useful when they are able to teach something to the Plumfield students.

When Bhaer uses a metaphor to teach the boys how they must cultivate the 'seeds' and 'garden' of their virtues, Jo vows to practice patience. "'I shall devote the whole of *my* plot to the largest crop of patience I can get, fir that is what I need most,' said Mrs Jo, so soberly that the lads fell to thinking in good earnest what they should say when their turns came, and some among them felt a twinge of remorse, that they had helped to use up Mother Bhaer's stock of patience so fast."[42] Despite her ongoing claims that she lacks sufficient patience, *Little Men's* version of Jo never seems to run short of an even temperament, and doesn't hesitate to make more work for herself. When Jo wants to bring in Nan, a troublesome local girl, Bhaer asks if Jo "[has] not troubles enough," Jo responds:

> "Oh dear, no," said Mother Bhaer, briskly. "I like it, and never was happier than since I had my wilderness of boys. You see, Fritz, I feel a great sympathy for Nan, because I was such a naughty child myself that I know all about it. She is full of spirits, and only needs to be taught what to do with them to be as nice a little girl as Daisy. Those quick wits of her would enjoy lessons if they were rightly directed, and what is now a tricksy midget would soon become a busy, happy child. I know how to manage her, for a remember how my blessed mother managed me…"[43]

Jo's characterization of her childhood feels alien to its depiction in *Little Women*, a reimagining of childhood playfulness from the eye of a disapproving adult—an adult far more disapproving than Marmee, in fact. Where Marmee leaves space for her daughters to make errors and learn practical lessons—and leaves her daughters to the vague oversight of the housekeeper for a portion of the novel—Jo is a highly present mother figure who seemingly offers constant attention to her charges. Thus, the reconfiguration of her childhood as being 'rightly directed' and 'highly managed' is essential to the reconciliation of her own happy childhood with her task of creating 'busy, happy' childhoods for her charges, while simultaneously performing the role of a 'good' mother, even when such a role demands constant labor.

A mother's labor doesn't necessarily end once her children are grown; being an older mother does not recreate the circumstances of childhood, though labor may be diminished. The series' continuation into *Jo's Boys* is the most ambivalent in terms of feminist possibility. The third books rejects any suggestion that it is adulthood generally that creates the stagnancy of *Little Men*, rather than imbalanced conditions of gender. *Jo's Boys* follows the 'little men' of the previous installment away from the idyll of Plumfield—and, indeed, emphasizes the successes of the not-so-little men of the series, as well. While *Jo's Boys* does, on a technicality, open on Jo and Meg in conversation, they are celebrating the accomplishments of their men: Laurie has donated money to open a college, where Mr. March, now a widower, serves as chaplain, and Professor Bhaer is the president. The sisters, meanwhile, "[divide] the care of the young people among them, each taking the part that suited her best. Meg was the motherly friend of the young women, Jo the confidante and defender of all the youths, and Amy the lady Bountiful who delicately smoothed the way for needy students."[44] Even with their children grown, the March sisters are cast as helpmeets and caregivers first, who work to facilitate their husbands' professional ambitions and take pride in their happiness. The little men of Plumfield have all gone off to great adventures: Franz is a merchant, Emil a sailor, and a variety of the other boys have found success in business, law, and agriculture. Demi has "gone through college with honour," maddening his mother and Aunt Jo by turning to journalism.[45] *Jo's Boys* feels somewhat more optimistic about the potential for feminist cultural change, albeit in a limited capacity. Laurie's university admits women, and Nan, despite being relentlessly pursued by Tom, chooses to forego marriage to pursue a medical career, while Josie finds success as an actress. Even as she demonstrates the successes of the next generation of

little women, Alcott still presents such potential for progress as a lopsided opportunity. Women can have careers, *Jo's Boys* argues, but only if they manage to avoid the snare of marriage—to become a doctor, Nan must not only make her way through medical school, but also avoid literal years of advancements from Tom—and that such avoidance is not accessible to all women.

In confessing her qualms about Josie's chosen career, Meg tells her son Demi that her concern isn't with the profession itself, but rather what it will cost Josie. "'I *should* enjoy it immensely, if I could only feel that the life would not hurt my girl, and leave her unsatisfied when it was too late to change; for nothing is harder to give up than the excitements of that profession. I know something of it; and if your blessed father had not come along, I'm afraid I should have been an actress in spite of Aunt March and all our honoured ancestors.'"[46] This statement, coming from Meg, is both strange and particularly revealing. In the very first scene of *Little Women*, Meg announces, "'I don't mean to act any more after this time; I'm getting too old for such things,'" (though the narrative does note that secretly she is "as much a child as ever about 'dressing up' frolics.")[47] Meg is the first to turn her mind to thoughts of romance, as well—in the "Vanity Fair" chapter, Jo feels she "could not follow" her sister who is newly "blushing and talking about admiration, lovers, and things of that sort"[48] So an admission from Meg, of all the sisters, that she had aspirations that her marriage derailed speaks to matrimony's potential for regret and how the marriage plot constricts even the ways in which women can imagine their lives: at sixteen, with adulthood ahead of her, Meg knows that she is 'supposed' to want, first and foremost, a loving marriage, and so she shapes her life into wanting precisely that. It is only as a widow that Meg is able to imagine, albeit retroactively, wanting a different future. Despite this

reframing, though, Meg feels certain that a career in acting is something that Josie will inevitably have to give up, as if a career for a woman cannot be anything more than a stopgap. Her fear that it will hurt her daughter, that it will "leave her unsatisfied when it [is] too late to change" speaks far more of the dangers of marriage than of profession, suggesting that it is her own life, rather than Josie's, that is too late to change. Meg's admission is not quite a revelation, however; Meg worries about the domestic capabilities of the girls who attend Laurie's college, and, "anxious lest the usual sneer ant learned women should apply to 'our girls,'" begins offering lessons in sewing, caretaking, and fashion.[49] During these lessons, Jo asks the room what they intend on doing after college:

> The answers were as usual: "I shall teach, help Mother, study medicine, art," etc.; but nearly all ended with: 'Till I marry."
> "But if you don't marry, what then?" asked Mrs Jo, feeling like a girl again as she listened to the answers, and watched the thoughtful, gay, or eager faces.
> "Be old maids, I suppose. Horrid, but inevitable, since there are so many superfluous women," answered a lively lass […]
> "It is well to consider that fact, and fit yourselves to be useful, not superfluous women. That class, by the way, is largely made up of widows, I find; so don't consider it a slur on maidenhood."
> "That's a comfort! Old maids aren't sneered at half as much as they used to be, since some of them have grown famous and proved that woman isn't a half but a whole human being, and can stand alone."[50]

Jo's Boys presents a cautiously hopeful horizon for women, one in which careers are increasingly possible, but in which the marriage plot is still perniciously dominant. Even in encouraging her students to think of futures that don't include marriage, Jo emphasizes the role of widows as 'useful women'—women who have married, likely borne and raised children, and only after the deaths of their husbands are able to pursue their own lives, and even then in ways that can be conceived of as 'useful.' The assessment that "old maids aren't sneered at half as much as they used to be" is a clear expression of the novel's view on the marriage plot: while alternative narratives for women are increasingly possible, the

battle against the entrenched marriage plot will be protracted, incremental, and not necessarily successful.

Little Men and *Jo's Boys* are not optimistic novels, and they are not delightful novels. Yet, despite being 'worse' novels than *Little Women*, they articulate a political argument that is impossible in a good novel, or even in a bad one that stands on its own. The maturation serial as a form, and the culture of readership created around the expectations established by *Little Women*, offers Alcott an extremely specific opportunity to coerce her readers into feeling the dangers of marriage, regardless of whether a marriage is based in sentiment or intellectual idealism. Growing up in fiction, Alcott argues, is impossible to do, and even more impossible to 'get right,' where a girl may find her way into satisfying womanhood while still retaining her potential as a heroine. The good life, difficult to grasp as it is for women living under the sentimentalized nineteenth-century vision of compulsory heterosexuality, has no narrative, and the story of a woman after marriage—such as it is—holds no joy. Alcott allows the vacuousness of a life lived only in memory of past happiness to shape her sequels as a means to highlight the grim prospects of literary womanhood that inevitably crush the life out of girl heroines who are made to grow up for the supposed enjoyment of their readers.

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[3] (xv)
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[5] Louisa May Alcott, *Little Men*. 1871. Puffin Books, 2015, 128-130.
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[7] Jennifer Doyle, "Jo March's Love Poems." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 60, no. 3, 2005, pp. 375–402, 379-380

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[14] (285)
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[26] Kathryn R. Kent, *Making Girls into Women : American Women's Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity* . Duke University Press, 2003, 80.
[27] Maria Nikolajeva, *From Mythic to Linear: Time in Children's Literature*. Scarecrow--Children's Literature Association, 2000, 111.
[28] *Little Women* 437
[29] Qtd in Elbert, Sarah. *A Hunger for Home : Louisa May Alcott and Little Women* . Temple University Press, 1984, 10; *Memoirs of Abigail May Alcott,* Houghton Library, Harvard University.
[30] Qtd in Elbert 15, *Alcott Family Papers*, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
[31] Qtd in Elbert 15 from Alcott Family Papers.
[32] *Little Men* 57
[33] (*59)*
[34] (238)
[35] (72)
[36] (73)
[37] (73)
[38] (73)
[39] (74)
[40] (74)
[41] (75)
[42] (50)
[43] (124)
[44] Louisa May Alcott. *Jo's Boys*. 1886. Puffin Books, 2015, 3.
[45] (5)
[46] (208)
[47] *Little Women* 8
[48] (100)
[49] *Jo's Boys* 309
[50] (310-1)

CHAPTER THREE: Fathers And/As Husbands, Repetition And/As Redemption, Suffering And/As Sentiment: Evangelical Excesses in Martha Finley's *Elsie Dinsmore* Series

In *One Writer's Beginnings,* Southern writer Eudora Welty recalls her mother's directions to their librarian: "'Eudora is nine years old and has my permission to read any book she wants from the shelves…with the exception of *Elsie Dinsmore.*'"[1] Welty's mother would go on to clarify that she didn't approve of the blind obedience Elsie shows her father, which extends to the point of self-harm. Such a prohibition would have surely shocked *Elsie's* author, Martha Finley, who writes of Elsie, in the preface to *Elsie's Girlhood*, the third installment in what would ultimately become a whopping twenty-eight volume *Elsie Dinsmore* series, "May my readers who have admired and loved her as a child find her still more charming in her fresh young girlhood; may she prove to all a pleasant companion and friend; and to those of them now treading the same portion of life's pathway a useful example also, particularly in her filial love and obedience."[vi2] Elsie's status as a role model is a key contribution to the novel's checkered reception. Unlike many contemporary girlhood series, *Elsie Dinsmore* has not entered the canon of girlhood classics, but neither has it faded into obscurity. The first eight *Elsie* books—in which Elsie travels through the maturation plot from childhood, motherhood, and grandmotherhood—continue to be in print, though they are almost exclusively published by small evangelical presses. The last twenty books, the travelogues, are rarely produced or read, despite their popularity at the

[vi] For full list of *Elsie Dinsmore* series titles and the year in which each installment was published, see appendix.

time of publication. Certainly the series' length can be held accountable for some portion of this; twenty eight books, particularly in a series that follows a linear path that should at least theoretically be read in order, is a prohibitively long collection. Worth greater attention, however, are the ways in which *Elsie Dinsmore* is an exceedingly bizarre series, one that concerns itself with the problems of growing up while continually looping back to states of immaturity, a plot that is apparently meant to impart lessons that characters never seem to learn.

The *Elsie Dinsmore* books thus perpetuate the limitations of the maturation serial by indulging in them, endlessly and to excess, particularly the notion that actual maturity is not required, or even necessarily desired, by the maturation serial. Elsie, who begins the series at eight years old, never substantially matures in any way besides the physical, and often gives the impression of being even younger than when she started. She starts out, and remains, hopelessly incapable of seeing any malice in the actions of others, of recognizing the ways of the world, or of adapting to changing circumstance. Finely frames this as innocence in a sense that is akin to godliness, but Elsie's continued inability to develop mentally from childhood gives the series an increasingly disturbing affect. The unsettlingly close and perversely romantic relationship Elsie has with her father feels uncomfortably pedophilic, as does, in turn, her later marriage to her father's best friend, who knows her from her early childhood. Innocent, pious, pure Elsie is thus presented as little more than a doll upon which Evangelical fantasies can be projected; Finley's insistence that the innocence that makes Elsie the ideal girl is the same quality that makes her the ideal woman argues that optimal womanhood is found in total malleability to the wills of the men around her (a cohort led by Christ but followed closely by fathers and husbands).

Finley's adherence to the maturation serial's demands that a girl remain girlish—even, in Elsie's case, as she becomes a mother and grandmother—demonstrates that, when the demands of the genre are not resisted, women (and worse, women at their best) are not characters at all, not even in allegedly what is their own stories. The *Elsie Dinsmore* series illustrates how the extreme ends of the maturation serial's logic takes a turn towards the nightmarish, offering a plot structure in which girls and grandmothers are the same in every sense except for that of their bodies (physical maturation and thus sexual availability being the only thing, ultimately, that matters to a masculinist ideology that seeks to control not only a woman's behavior but indeed her every thought) and in which this narrowing of the self becomes not only a marker of 'goodness' but a route (*the* route) to happiness. Worse, the maturation plot in this construction proves to be even more endlessly replicable, not only in the twenty-eight books that were gobbled up by Finley's eager readership, but in the explicit role modeling that advocated for the re-creation of Elsie as a type.

The *Elsie* books draw attention to repetitions in character, and models role modeling. Readers not only learn from Elsie, they learn *how to learn* from watching Elsie emulate her stepmother, Rose Allison (even if Elsie, already an idealized child, does not need these lessons herself) even as they are asked to ignore the repetitions in plot which, by design, force them to rehearse these lessons over and over again. Emotions are taken seriously, then immediately disregarded so that the same dramas can be consistently reenacted. Elsie moves through the stages of appropriate development for an evangelical woman—as marked by the novels' titles, starting with the third book, *Elsie's Girlhood*—but is consistently infantilized. The histories of earlier novels are rewritten by later ones, with

depictions of the changing American South added and discarded as needed, and when Elsie has reached and passed all necessary feminine milestones, Finley abandons even the pretense of writing maturation novels, and turns instead to the 'travelogue' episodes of the *Elsie* series, in which an elderly Elsie visits various locales. The genre of Finley's texts is assembled in patchwork; elements of abolitionist literature are borrowed even as she crafts and idyllic image of the antebellum South, the pathos of the sentimental novel is exploited to the point that the narrative's crisis loses all meaning. Even the format of the pedagogical religious text for children, which permits children to make mistakes so that they may learn from them, is not entirely explored in Finley's novel, as Elsie is too good to ever properly err. Pushing back against Finley's use of highly legible nineteenth century sentimental tropes (the Sinless Child, the deathbed scene) uncovers depth to what is, on the surface, a deceptively, even irritatingly simple novel. Yet, though the ways in which Finely deploys sentimental imagery ultimately all serves to argue for the rightness of a white Evangelical ethos, the places where these tropes are cast aside reveal a larger problem of genre. What happens when a sentimental heroine must live? What do you do with the sinless child when she grows up? The problems of the maturation serial are thrown into sharp relief in the *Elsie* series, with generic constraints in constant conflict with the desire to at once keep the ideal child young and innocent and the necessity of turning her into a proper wife and mother.

Finley's lack of care for typical narrative norms—her disregard of consistency, her haphazard borrowing from various genres—helps reveal what makes Elsie such a woefully dissatisfying girl character: Elsie, and idealized model for how girls are supposed to behave under strict evangelism, is barely a character at all. Though she is at least nominally the

protagonist of each episode in the series, Elsie does not meet the requirements for a suitable protagonist: she does not change, or learn, or grow, or adapt. Interactions with other characters do not leave a mark on Elsie; rather, she consistently leaves her impression on them, laboring endlessly (though without ever giving the impression of doing work) to push those around her towards a more robust evangelical Christendom, no matter the cost to herself. Elsie is thus less a character than a conduit, an eight-year-old religious scholar whose innocence and lack of experience are a boon rather than a detriment. She is scant more than a Bible who can cry. The result is a dissatisfying maturation serial; girls and women are essentially flattened into one category in the *Elsie* novels, and to an even more dramatic extent in Elsie herself, whose constant repetition of affects and events keep her infantilized, even as she ages from book to book. The actual progress of maturation is neither taken seriously nor even necessarily wanted, but rather the framework up on which to build a functional conversion narrative, one that exists inside and outside the text. As Elsie's outpouring of goodness brings those around her closer to Christ, so are they meant to have the same effect on her readers, and, once these readers have adequately followed the model of those Elsie converts (her father, Mr. Travilla, and to a lesser extent Aunt Adelaide), they can go on to follow the model of Elsie herself: namely, to evangelize.

The *Elsie Dinsmore* series thus uneasily inhabits a position between a linear serial and an episodic one; while readers are meant to grow with Elsie, such a process is limited both by the idea that Elsie herself never really grows in any meaningful way, and that her idealized status from the very beginning does not give readers any clear way to 'improve' if they are somewhat more imperfect than Elsie (which as living human children, they most

certainly are). The result is a series that is deceptively simple on its surface—Elsie is good and spreads goodness around her—in its trafficking in sentiment, and yet more and more confounding as the details of the many texts are explored. In this chapter, I use lenses of feminism to dissect the repetition of the evangelical serial to inquire about the manners in which Finley's divergence from the more standard elements of the girlhood novel are a boon, rather than a hinderance, to making her ultimate point about an appropriate evangelical education for girls. But an educational lecture is not a novel, and Elsie as a character and the *Elsie* books as narratives are so resistant to change that they strain the very definition of what actually makes a novel a novel. Exploring theories on American evangelical culture that originated in the nineteenth century illuminates why, despite the manifold disappointments of actual storytelling in these novels and despite their questionable status as novels at all, the series was a massive commercial success at the time of its publication that transformed into a niche favorite in the later parts of the twentieth century.

The *Elsie* books thus throw into even sharper relief the problems of the maturation serial that I have outlined in the previous chapters of this dissertation. Finley's books use Montgomery's tactics of delay in order to keep Elsie at an age that is more 'manageable' to the plot, yet without Montgomery's sense of character that renders these pre-marital adventures whimsical entertainment. Indeed, the two authors' senses of how to manage the unruly time between true childhood and marriage are nearly diametrically opposed; while Mongtomery exploits the promise of an eventual marriage to play with queer attachments and professional ambitions, Finley resists the pull of adolescent self-development by keeping Elsie at the same apparent mental and emotional age throughout the years to her

marriage, though she physically ages from eight to eighteen. 'Maturation,' in the *Elsie* books, is thus portrayed as essentially farcical. Marriage, in Finley's texts, is not merely the main legible marker of growing up, but perhaps the only one *at all*, rendering everything that happens before not a progress of change but rather a (very lengthy) description of what girlhood 'should' look like. Moreover, Elsie's marriage does not suddenly transform her life, despite the promises of the marriage plot. In fact, Elsie's marriage is even less of a change than that of the marriage of other maturation-plot heroines. Though Finley dispatches with Elsie's husband quickly—she only marries in the fourth book, *Elsie's Womanhood*, and her (much older) husband is dead by the seventh, *Elsie's Widowhood*, a title that was overwhelmingly voted upon by Finley's readership—her post-marital installments do not have the sense of Alcott's that these sequels are boring intentionally, that it is the marriage plot itself that is the failure.[vii] By submitting more fully to the obvious sentimental tenants of the maturation serial—that both marriage and motherhood are desirable, necessary, and joyous in their lived realities—Finley reveals, more clearly than the other authors in this study, how thin the promises of the genre truly are. Ultimately, Elsie ends up even more 'stuck' than her other counterparts in the genre; stifled by the demands of a patriarchal white Evangelical culture, her status as future wife conscripts her into the role of pseudo wife from her earliest childhood, casting her as the caretaker of others' moral character essentially from the moment of her birth. In Finley's

[vii] In a previous chapter, I have written on Montgomery's unhappy marriage, and how the later-written *Anne* books, which take place in the interstitial years between her engagement to Gilbert and their wedding, may have been informed by their author's own distinct lack of marital bliss. Finley, who takes the least critical view of marriage as an institution of any of the authors in this dissertation, never married. Though this is also true of Alcott, the fame of her parents, as well as Alcott's own record-keeping, clearly documented her awareness of the marital discord central to the Alcott home.

characterization, goodness is a curse, one that demands stagnation to the point of being antithetical to maturation, and girlhood is a non-state, merely a stopgap that must be endured on the way to physical (sexual, marital, maternal) maturity.

I. Role Modeling and Repetition of Character: Replication and Ahistory in *Elsie Dinsmore*

Elsie's characterization in the first novel demonstrates the difficulties of crafting an ideal evangelical heroine within the confines of the maturation serial. The overlap between women's writing and evangelical writing that emerged and intensified in antebellum America was well-established and easily recognized by the early postbellum years into which Finely published the first *Elsie Dinsmore* novels. Scholarly work on the religious and moralizing nature of women's novels is also abundantly documented, and indeed woven into the very narrative of an academic defense of nineteenth century women's fiction. Jane Tompkins frames sentimental novelists as representing "[a] tradition of evangelical piety and moral commitment" and argues as to how sentimental heroines used a personal, focused scope of religious conversion (Tompkins labels this 'the closet,' which can also be the home, the family, the heart) as a locale for moralizing that was highly gendered, highly legible, and highly effective to the nineteenth century reader.[3] Tompkins suggests that these personal affective appeals were perhaps even more than more public movements designed to proliferate a Christian sentiment that hearkened back to Puritanism in its strictness and fervor. Evangelism tied into the political movement of the feminist-abolitionists, and thus to the antislavery movement; novels, which deployed sentimental conventions such as individualizing suffering and framing broader social change within a discrete domestic setting, gave women writers legibility and political agency—while

keeping them within a strict sense of appropriate femininity, which Isabelle Lehuu calls "both conformist and subversive."[4] The function of the little girl in sentimental fiction was a similarly established trope, most clearly and popularly by Stowe's Little Eva, who, appropriate to her name, has saintly goodness and an uncanny ability to evangelize. If women's fiction, written by white, middle-class women, marked the moral guardianship of the culture, little girls (white, middle-class, typically blonde) are the angelic harbingers of earnest devotion, tellers of holy truth when such realities are obfuscated by worldly concerns. By the time of *Elsie Dinsmore*'s publication in 1867—a point in time near enough to the conclusion of the Civil War that the cultural shift between antebellum and postbellum eras were deeply in flux, with the latter still evidently ill-defined—the sinless child was an abundantly established archetype, one linked with a brand of abolitionism that was deeply concerned with slavery's impact on the morality of the white family. Finley, however, disregards the more progressive possibilities of this character (questionable though its motives may be), choosing to neither situate her heroine in the new, complicated postbellum world, operating instead in a sanitized vision of the antebellum South, nor to put forth an abolitionist sentiment that offers an argument for even an extremely limited version of racial justice. What remains is an evangelical narrative where the powers of the white heroine are used to prop up the importance of the white nuclear family, with the strong white patriarch at its center.

Elsie is first introduced in the schoolroom, where she learns with her troublesome cousins. Despite being the unwanted child foisted upon her Aunt Adelaide, dismissed by the governess for not being a true daughter of the household, Elsie is unwaveringly grateful for every opportunity and insists on scrupulous honesty, even when her supposed sins aren't

her fault. When mischievous Arthur prods and jostles Elsie, despite her pleas for him to stop, until she makes a blot on her page, he offers to help her by tearing out the page so she can begin anew and avoid the punishment of being left home from their outing. Elsie, however, refuses: "'Thank you, Arthur,' said the little girl, smiling through her tears. 'You are very kind, but it would not be honest [and] I would rather stay home than be deceitful.'"[5] Though cousin Lora eventually reveals Arthur's role in the imperfect assignment, Miss Day, who is "always more severe with Elsie than with any other of her pupils," decides to punish both Arthur and Elsie, despite Lora's protestations that Elsie was not at fault. Ultimately, Arthur's punishment is lifted, when his mother begs for lenience, given that "he is only a child"—though several years older than Elsie.[6] Despite this injustice, Elsie makes no protest and works to quell her unruly feelings:

> In the meantime, little Elsie sat at her desk, striving to conquer the feelings of anger and indignation that were swelling in her heart. Elsie, though she possessed much of the "ornament of a meek and quiet spirit," was not yet perfect, and often had a fierce contest with her naturally quick temper. Yet it was seldom, very seldom, that word or tone or look betrayed the existence of such feelings, and it was a common remark in the family that Elsie had no spirit.[7]

This introduction to Elsie sets her up in contrast to her cousins—she is less troublesome than Arthur, less haughty than Louise, and less concerned with justice than Lora—despite being raised in the same household. The family reads Elsie's obedience as spinelessness; her grandfather insists that "she is no Dinsmore, or she would know how to stand up for her own rights."[8] Elsie's character presents giving in as a form of resistance. By refusing to give up her relentless obedience, even when it, paradoxically, resists the wishes of her guardians, Elsie's 'goodness' is presented as both innate and resistant to worldly influences.

Yet political concerns shape Finley's depiction of righteousness in a vision of the antebellum South that consistently is framed as having an identity that regularly alludes to

(but refuses to outright mention) slavery, and that exists in opposition to a North that is simultaneously more urbane and yet more righteous. Elsie Grayson, the younger Elsie's saint-like mother, met and married Horace Dinsmore in New Orleans, before Horace's father, unimpressed by the Graysons' fortune in trade, sends Horace "North to college." Elsie the elder dies of melancholy over the loss of her husband, but not before giving birth to a daughter, leaving little Elsie to the care of Aunt Chloe, "an old servant of the family," who is clearly racialized as Black through her use of vernacular and as enslaved via her nomenclature (in subsequent books, Elsie refers to her as 'mammy,' though not in the first installment).[9] It is Aunt Chloe who first introduces Elsie to the Bible, and Aunt Chloe alone who consistently understands and supports Elsie's strict devotion to Biblical dictates. Aunt Chloe is additionally, until the arrival of Rose Allison at the beginning of *Elsie Dinsmore*, the only person to love Elsie (rightfully), despite the little girl's fervent commitment to being the perfect child. Finley depicts her enslaved characters ala Stowe: as having the clear-sighted goodness of a child and the resultant piety that such simple good sense indicates. Unlike Stowe, this goodness is not presented as a reason for freedom. Rather, Finley's Black characters exist only to prop up examples of Elsie's goodness and are not portrayed as themselves deserving of sympathy beyond what is necessary to demonstrate Elsie's endless goodness and thoughtfulness. The incident where Elsie reads the Bible to a blind, enslaved woman (a moment played more for pathos than logic, since an enslaved woman would not have be permitted to read even if she could see) is no analogue to Little Eva reading to Uncle Tom. The (unnamed) elderly woman is a prop to the scene rather than a beneficiary of any sort of religious pedagogy; the real beneficiary of the incident is Elsie's

father, who watches from the shadows. There is no Topsy in the *Elsie* novels, redeemed by a newfound perspective on goodness.

Finley, writing from Maryland in 1867, inundates her audience with signals of slavery while refusing to label it as such; further, she keeps the timeline of the early novels vague (it is not until *Elsie's Womanhood*, the fourth book, when the onset of the Civil War indicates a concrete date; based on this timeline, the first book takes place around 1845), obscuring its temporal relation to abolition. The term "slave" is only used once in *Elsie Dinsmore*—in reference to *Elsie*. Horace Dinsmore lectures his stepmother, insisting that she "understand that *his* daughter was not to be made a slave to [her cousin] Enna's whims." That this insistence comes immediately after Elsie's grandfather insists that Horace "'whip her well'" contributes to the tone-deafness of this conversation in a novel that takes place on a plantation.[10] Finley's treatment of 'the slavery question' reveals something of the conundrum she faces in attempting to create a model of infinitely replicable 'universal' goodness while couching that model within a deeply historicized series of nineteenth century motifs. Yet, her compromise exploits another nineteenth-century trend, one that would become increasingly prevalent as the postbellum era progressed: Finley situates her texts in a nostalgia-fueled idyll of the antebellum South that never existed, a vision of the past that could not be held to specific historical standards because its own relationship to history is obscured, not only by Finley's refusal to articulate a clear timeline, but because its relationship to reality is tenuous at best. Finley reveals something of her audience in this choice. The little Northern girls who made up the bulk of her audience did not have any conflicting, real images of the American South to disrupt this mirage of tranquilly whitewashed Virginia plantation life. The depoliticized closed

domestic world of the early *Elsie* novels is thus alternately bizarre to a nineteenth-century reader trained in sentiment as politics and oddly ideal for Finley's other conundrum, regarding Elsie's perfection. If Elsie is to be a role model who demonstrates goodness to real little girls, not by overcoming faults but by never having them in the first place, and if little girls are meant to emulate her perfection without any clear indication of how one may transition from imperfection to perfection—or how, more dramatically, one is meant to approach the impossibility of modeling always having been perfect in the first place—then why shouldn't this state of unreality, meant to be unquestioningly accepted, be mimicked in the setting? Moreover, if role modeling is a key to replicability, if little readers should become little Elsies, and if Elsie is a miniature version of her mother and Rose Allison, and if these little girls (both real and not) are meant to grow up to be perfect mothers who then train perfect little girls of their own, and on and on and on, then historical specificity becomes an impossibility. Finley's evangelism demands ahistoricism but cannot have it, because readers always have contexts. Because an entirely stagnant and apolitical world is a difficult world to accept, Finley offers her readers something much easier to swallow: a bubble that never existed but seems as though, just maybe, it could have—and is utopic enough (through a deeply white, wealthy, Christian lens) that perhaps it could again. The world outside the bubble moves on, but that movement itself is an enemy whose worldly concerns threaten to distract from an essential vision of feminine goodness.

The Deep South is thus characterized as a source of 'right' womanhood and 'right' Christianity, while the North, and Europe thereafter, is the lure that pulls Horace Dinsmore away from his wife and daughter—and from proper religious conviction. Yet Rose Allison is emphasized as being from the North, as well (though it is later revealed that her father also

owns a plantation), and her dedication to Biblical studies form the basis of her early relationship with Elsie. When Rose finds Elsie weeping in self-castigation over daring to feel anger at her unjust treatment from her governess, she gently teaches Elsie about the proper scope of sentimental tears: it is proper to grieve imperfections, but not *too* much, lest the excess of emotion suggest that Elsie forgets that God forgives. Rose, the right (white) religious model for little Elsie, finds the Dinsmores lacking in piety, and monologues in the first chapter about the Bible as her favorite book and the joy that religion has brought into her life. Rose is the improved version of "not yet perfect" Elsie, a surrogate mother that becomes her real stepmother (both mother and daughter will be tasked with improving Horace and the rest of the Dinsmore family, to varying results) whose religious convictions are framed as both influenced by and entirely separate from her political upbringing.

The first volume in Finley's series thus sets the stage for the contradictory illogic that shapes the narrative of the maturation of a child that is already almost perfect into a perfect woman (as if these terms weren't already contradictory in themselves). To be an ideal role model, Elsie must be separate from and better than other children, but she almost must be the replication of a type. She must be perfect but not *too* perfect so that she may thread the needle between being the ideal like whom readers may aspire to become without becoming quite so faultless as to alienate those aspirants. Elsie, as an archetype, must seem simultaneously lofty and achievable, and so she must be singularly good but not singular. This goodness is also at once natural (Elsie has gotten it from her mother, even though the elder Elsie died too soon for her daughter to know her) and learned (Elsie studies the Bible relentlessly). Elsie cannot be shown to be good enough (better than other

children) unless those children are, at their core, worse than she is, but if goodness cannot be learned by real-world children worse than she is, then there is no point in attempting to emulate her. Despite this contraction, the vision Finley presents of a women-oriented religious education is relatively straightforward: Elsie, nearly perfect, strives to be actually perfect by taking to heart the lessons of Rose, while obediently following the dictates of her inappropriately secular grandmother and governess. The latter of these groups demand (per Elsie's own ideologies about what constitutes 'being good') Elsie's obedience but not her admiration or even necessarily her affection. None of these authorities is sufficient to challenge Elsie's absolute devotion to Christ—any conflict reflects poorly on her the earthly authority rather than her divine one. Elsie's mental anguish focuses entirely on her own failures; she is concerned with the ways she has disappointed herself—albeit confused by the feeling that she has disappointed God, both by sinning and by forgetting his eternal forgiveness.

II. Suffering as Plot: Temporary Conversions and Novelistic Failure in *Elsie Dinsmore* and *Elsie's Holidays at Roselands*

This relative tranquility is disrupted when Elsie gets her long-held wish: the return home of her father, Horace Dinsmore. Upon hearing that her father's arrival is imminent, Elsie redoubles her efforts to please him, even in advance of his return. Horace, however, "[pays] outward respect to the forms of religion, but cared nothing for the vital power of godliness, trusted entirely to his morality, and looked upon Christians as hypocrites and deceivers" who has learned "that his daughter Elsie was one of these, and, though he would not have acknowledged it even to himself, it had prejudiced him against her."[11] Horace's predilection for displeasure leads him to be stern upon meeting Elsie, which, in turn,

transforms her desire to please into terror. Horace continues to willfully misread Elsie's increasing desperation for his approval; when she cries at his dismissive treatment, he complains that the return of a parent should not be cause for grief; when he cossets and coddles his youngest sister, Enna, while deliberately ignoring his daughter, he grouses that he cannot abide jealous people. It is only when his friend Travilla praises Elsie that Horace becomes interested:

> "Really Dinsmore," said Mr. Travilla […] "your little girl is remarkably intelligent, as well as remarkably pretty, and I have discovered that she has quite a good deal of musical talent."
>
> "Indeed! I think it is quite a pity that she does not belong to you, Travilla, instead of me, since you seem to appreciate her so much more highly," replied the father, laughing.
>
> "I wish she did," said his friend. "But seriously, Dinsmore, you ought to love that child, for she certainly loves you devotedly."[12]

Travilla's arrival signals the introduction of another set of replications within the novel: that of the masculine patriarch. Despite his relative disinterest in Elsie, Horace is quick to note that she 'belongs' to him, despite joking about transferring this ownership to Travilla. For his part, though Travilla is notably kinder to Elsie throughout the first two novels, his wish that Elsie did belong to him feels less paternal than it initially seems, given that he eventually becomes her husband.

The *Elsie* books seem relatively untroubled by this transfer, however. For Travilla to see a child as a future wife or a wife as a past child—despite the sinister aspect that a future sexual relationship places on all the instances in which he draws child Elsie into his lap or pets her hair—is framed as not only natural but potentially even desirable. If Elsie has known her (already fully adult) husband since she was a child, then she already knows how to view him as a higher authority—as a proper evangelical wife should. Indeed, when the couple become engaged at the end of *Elsie's Girlhood,* the space between girlhood and

womanhood is consistently minimized. As he proposes, Travilla repeatedly refers to Elsie as "my dear child" and "my little friend"—the same nicknames he uses for her the first day he meets her.[13] His proposal likewise makes no reference to a preference for maturity: "'Oh little Elsie, if you only knew how I love you; how I have loved you, and only you, all these years—as child and as woman—how I have waited and longed, hoping even against hope, that some day I might be able to win the priceless treasure of your young heart.'"[14] They embrace—though do not kiss—and sit in quiet, mutually adoring bliss for "half an hour or an hour afterward (they reckoned nothing of the flight of time)" until Dinsmore arrives, as though to complete the transfer.[15] Travilla, "still holding fast to his new-found treasure," echoes the language of his first conversation about Elsie, now years past. "Will you give her to me, Dinsmore?"[16] Horace must first determine that he remains first in Elsie's affections—"'Dear papa, I have never loved you better,'" Elsie assures him—then accedes, saying "'Take her, my friend, she is yours.'"[17] In the final two paragraphs of the books, Dinsmore then goes to place Elsie's hand in Travilla's, but Elsie insists on grasping each man in one of her hands. Dinsmore "[stoops] to press another kiss on the ruby lips. 'Let us be happy, for we are not to part.' Then walking quickly away, he left them alone together."[18] The novel ends here, Elsie's engagement sealed with a kiss, not from her fiancé, but from her father. This is, the novels' titles suggest, also the final seal on Elsie's girlhood—when the series resumes, it is under the heading of *Elsie's Womanhood*.

In the opening of *Elsie's Womanhood*, which begins immediately after the events of the final pages of *Elsie's Girlhood*—suggesting that the transformation from girl to woman happens instantly with the transference of masculine authority from father to husband—the women of the Dinsmore family, Rose and Adelaide, comment on the inappropriate

difference in age between Elsie and Travilla. Adelaide even points out the absurdity of the situation ("'Think of your intimate friend addressing you as father,' laughed Adelaide; 'it's really too ridiculous!'") while Rose suggests the inappropriateness of the match, given that Travilla has been "'so intimate in the family since her early childhood.'"[19] However, such objections, as with other voices of seeming reason in the *Elsie* books, function as mere straw man arguments. Within a page, seeing that Elsie is apparently happy with her much-older betrothed, both women give up their concerns, and when other figures comment on the age difference, Elsie is gifted opportunities to offer further reasons for dismissal. She insists that Travilla is "all the wiser and better" for his age, and "young in heart, and far from looking old" and therefore better than "silly, brainless fops, who expect women to neither talk sense nor understand it." [*Elsie's Womanhood* 3] These comments distract the reader from the recognition that Travilla has been framed as a suitable husband not despite his age or friendship with Horace, but because of it; he is the ideal spouse because he is as close as Elsie can come to marrying her own father. Husbands, in the *Elsie* novels, bear only a nominal difference from fathers, nor fathers from lovers. Nor is the suggestion of incestuous desire a point of concern. What matters is the submission to a authoritative paternalistic male who, as long as his legible social position is correct, may easily be swapped one for another. The trouble—and the thing that Elsie must learn to navigate as a mark of her maturation—is how to balance these authorities such that she may be in perfect obedience to all without betraying any of the others.

Thus, though Finley's reference to Elsie's "filial love and obedience" are a pinnacle, in the author's view, of what makes Elsie a suitable role model, Elsie's desire to please Horace is consistently troubled—and must be so, as Elsie's balancing act is the plot.

Horace's desire to demonstrate 'ownership' over Elsie emerges as a need to supersede Travilla's authority; when Travilla asks that Elsie perform on the piano for a party, Elsie, shy, balks, Horace demands that she obey at once. Travilla, noting the child's distress, attempts to withdraw the request, but Horace refuses to rescind the order. Elsie, embarrassed and upset at her father's sternness, botches the performance, and though Travilla attempts to soothe her, Dinsmore is less forgiving. He pronounces himself ashamed of her and sends her off to bed in tears, then refuses to speak to her for several days as punishment for her failure. Horace fashions his authority as absolute and makes no allowances for errors made due to forgetfulness, mistakes, or even possibility. When Elsie sits on the floor to play with other children, forgetting that, several months prior, her father had instructed her to never sit on the floor, on the grounds that it is not ladylike, he punishes her as severely as if she had willfully disobeyed—which, of course, Elsie never does. And though multiple characters complain about Horace's severity—other children attempt to lure Elsie into misbehavior, calling her father unreasonable, and Elsie's Aunt Adelaide, whose overall interest in Elsie is lackluster, pleads with her brother for leniency—he refuses to relent, and Elsie defends her father whenever anyone suggests that his demands for perfection go too far.

Only one authority can challenge that of Elsie's father: Christ. Elsie's devotion is absolute, yet even as her consistent praise and obedience causes Horace to thaw to and become proud of his small daughter, he remains dismissive of her piety. Her father's affection secured, Elsie transforms her greatest wish from wanting her father's love for her own sake to hoping that he will similarly find his way to love their mutual heavenly father. Despite her continued insistence that Horace's strict punishments are warranted, Elsie

confesses to her Aunt Adelaide that she "can't tell papa anything;" Dinsmore does not accept excuses (even as he likewise punishes Elsie for failing to provide full explanations), and proclaims crying—the choice weapon of a sentimental heroine—shameful in a girl of eight years old.[20] But God accepts her tears and explanations without recrimination, and Elsie expresses her love and religious devotion with nearly the same frequency that she avows her adoration of her father. Yet she fears for Horace's secularity, and thus the potential he will not reach heaven after death. "'We may hope to meet [mamma] in heaven, dear papa,' said Elsie softly, 'for she loved Jesus, and if we love Him we shall go there too when we did. Do you love Jesus, papa?' she timidly inquired, for she had seen him do a number of things which she knew to be wrong—such as riding out for pleasure on the Sabbath, reading secular newspapers, and engaging in worldly conversation—and she greatly feared he did not."[21] Horace dodges the question, prompting Elsie to speak of her own devotion, instead. Despite Elsie's earnest proselyting, Horace remains unmoved, and when he defends his daughter's strict observances, it is not on their own account, but rather because he does not wish anyone to have authority over Elsie but him. This conflict—between Elsie's absolute devotion and Horace's desire for absolute control—leads to the crisis of the novel, in which Horace demands that Elsie play piano for a visiting friend, though devout Elsie insists that it is improper to play music on Sunday. That others present try to intercede on Elsie's behalf—Adelaide offers to play herself, since she does not have the same religious scruples, while the visitors insist that they don't need to hear the piece—this only strengthens Horace's conviction that he will be obeyed—and that his total control over his daughter will be displayed. When Elsie uncharacteristically continues to refuse, Horace grows angry, and commands that she cannot leave the bench until she has

obeyed—even if it means she does not move until the following morning. Unable to break the Sabbath and yet unable to disobey Horace Dinsmore, Elsie sits at a piano bench for hours, as Dinsmore's party happens behind her. Travilla attempts to intercede—first trying to convince Elsie that perhaps it is better to obey her father than God in this case, as the latter is more forgiving, and then appealing to Dinsmore—to no effect. When Elsie insists one final time that she cannot break the Sabbath, Dinsmore frames his command as having equal weight: "'Very well, then, I cannot break my word. You will sit there until you will submit, and until then you must fast.'"[22] The party continues merrily on until it is interrupted by the thump of Elsie's falling body as she faints, striking her head as she falls.

Despite Elsie's apparent near-death experience, she quickly awakens and preaches to both Dinsmore and Travilla the importance of loving Christ; the former, shaken by the prospect of losing his daughter, finds appeal in the promise of an eternally heavenly family, while the latter, who always planned to repent before his death (but estimated that he still had time for earthly concerns before repentance was necessary), is reminded by Elsie's accident that nobody knows how much time they have left. The remainder of the book is spent on Elsie's gradual conversion of Horace. These conversations, detailed laboriously in the book, depend frequently on Elsie's recitation of texts: she quotes the Bible extensively, and is occasionally permitted to read aloud from it, as well as summarizes the pertinent lessons from *The Pilgrim's Progress* (avowed to be her second-favorite book), and recites a long poem called "The Pilgrim's Wants."[viii] Though Horace does not quite avow devotion to Christ to Elsie's satisfaction, he does loosen his jealousy over Elsie's continued insistence

[viii] A note from Finley states: "These beautiful words are not mine, nor do I know either the name of the author or where they were originally published." (*Elsie Dinsmore* 267)

that she loves him second best, after Jesus, and begins to reflect more on her angelic proselyting. Horace, simultaneously shaken by the threat of Elsie's loss and awed by the strength of Elsie's devotion (both to him and to Christ), finally believes in his daughter's goodness—and is learning to follow it towards his own religious awakening.

However, this entire drama is re-enacted in *Elsie's Holidays at Roselands*, which was originally written as part of the first installment, but only ever published separately. With no compelling reason, Horace resumes the stern and remote attitude towards Elsie that he held in the beginning of the first novel. The dramas of the first installment are reenacted, but intensified. Horace's possessiveness is more explicit in *Roselands*, more embodied. When Elsie's friend Lucy asks for one of Elsie's curls to make a bracelet, Dinsmore intercedes:

> "No, Miss Lucy," said Mr. Dinsmore, looking at them over his paper, "you can't have one of my curls; I can't spare it."
> "I don't want one of *your* curls, Mr. Dinsmore," laughed Lucy, merrily. "I didn't' ask for it, Your hair is very pretty, too, but it would be quite too short."
> "I beg your pardon, Miss Lucy, if my ears deceived me," said he, with mock gravity, "but I was quite certain I heard you asking for one of my curls. Perhaps, though, you are not aware of the fact that my curls grow on two heads."
> "I don't know what you mean, Mr. Dinsmore," replied Lucy, laughing again, "but it was one of Elsie's curls I asked for."
> "Elsie doesn't own any," said he; "they all belong to me. I let her wear them, to be sure, but that is all; she has no right to give them away."
> He turned to his paper again, and Elsie bent over her work, her face flushed, and her little hand trembling so that she could scarcely hold her needle.[23]

Dinsmore's reaction to Lucy's request—a fairly common convention of the time; Dinsmore's interjection is preceded by a conversation amongst the girls about which of their friends have bracelets made of the curls of friends, sisters, cousins—is self-evidently sinister, and the way he sets up Lucy to misunderstand him smacks of mockery. Rather than merely forbidding the cutting of one of Elsie's curls (already something of a possessive

overreach), Dinsmore is intentionally confusing, so that he may repeatedly assert his ownership over Elsie's body, to which "she has no right." Moreover, though, it affords the narrative a noticeable silence from Elsie. As Lucy laughs, assuming that Mr. Dinsmore is either teasing or misunderstanding, Elsie is excluded—after all, if her hair and body are not her own, who owns her voice? What inspires laughter in Lucy leads to dread in Elsie, for she has *already* given one of her curls away, and she fears confessing that she did not anticipate his request. She frets while her friends play happily on: "'I'm afraid I ought to tell papa,' she thought, 'that I did give one of my curls away. I never thought about his caring, but I might have known, because when I wanted my hair cut last summer, he said there shouldn't be one of them touched. Oh dear, why didn't I think of that? I am afraid he will be very much displeased.'"[24] Elsie naturally confesses, and though she is not punished in this case, the moment is not assured for the reader—Elsie has been, in the past, and will be, in the future, punished for such innocent mistakes.

Indeed, this incident foreshadows the mercurial nature of Horace's affection. Father and daughter read together a letter from Rose Allison, which Elsie, always occupied in anticipating her father's moods, fears has upset him. Horace comments, "'Miss Allison seem to warn you not to trust too much in the permanence of my affection, but you need not fear that you will ever lose it, unless indeed you cease to be deserving of it. No, not even then,' [he added] 'for even should you grow very naughty and troublesome, you would still be my child—a part of myself and of my lost Elsie, and therefore very dear to me.'"[25] Even this supposed assertion of assured love is conditional—Elsie is loved for her own sake only marginally, and only due to her exemplary behavior. Her true value to Horace is as a piece of himself and as a replication of her lost mother, his great love. A daughter (and, by

Finley's fashioning, the ideal daughter) is a repeated object upon which a patriarch can (should, must) project his own importance and sense of self. Thus, when Elsie response, "'Ah, papa! How could I ever bear to lose your love? I think I should die,'" this comment is not just foreshadowing, but also jarringly literal. From the moment he arrives in her life, Elsie exists solely to please her father, her happiness tied up entirely in his pride and affection. In this single aspect, Horace does manage to outstrip Christ in Elsie's esteem; the lord, she knows, loves her unconditionally, and while this love is a consistent source of comfort, its very reliability separates it from the variable highs and lows of Horace's alternating adoration and disdain. Unlike in the traditional form of a girlhood novel, which we hold to be primarily concerned with the development of the central girl character, the early *Elsie Dinsmore* novels make progress only when Horace allows them to—and they revert when Horace demands it—because he alone among the characters is capable of being flawed and still remaining (somehow, and in a way that is only really legible through Elsie's continued, relentless insistence on it) the perfect father.

Replications of type in the *Elsie Dinsmore* books highlight the contradictions of the novels, but also their relative unimportance in the face of the unimpeachable facts of the evangelizing narrative. God is perfect and perfectly loving, the idealized heavenly father. He is to be followed and adored absolutely, and if Elsie's earthly father does not have the same perfect love, this does not change her responsibility towards him. Horace is likewise to be followed and adored absolutely with a (very, very) nearly religious devotion. If Horace is imperfect (and as the novels continually remind its readers, to everyone except Elsie, he is not even remotely close to perfect—continually, those around him point out that he is too strict, too stubborn, and often unreasonably proud) he still remains perfect, because Elsie

(nearly perfect) insists that he is. Elsie, merely a girl, is not afforded the same freedom; her goodness is required to bolster that of her father (if Elsie is an honest child, and she claims her father is good, then he must be good), to maintain the affect of the saintly elder Elsie, whose goodness was the first to temporarily sway Horace, and as a way of proving the grace that comes from her devotion. If Elsie does not consistently perform the role of a 'good' girl—obedient, pretty, well-mannered, even-tempered, always thinking of other, pious, detached from worldly concerns, happy except for in rare appropriate cases, and, crucially, white—so no longer can support the ideological goals that stem from her goodness. Even her apparently devoted father cannot manage to commit to loving Elsie for her own sake—he relies on behavior and possessiveness to measure her worth—largely because Elsie is barely a person; rather, she is a simulacrum of the perfect evangelical woman (essentially interchangeable with a girl), whose sole existence is to improve the souls of the men around her.

Because Elsie's project is thus beyond the scope of the worldly, it is similarly beyond the scope of worldly logic. This leads to another of the novels' contradictions: while individual instances of illogical or uncharacteristic behavior on the part of any of the characters who are not Elsie can be ignored (Arthur's cruelty is varyingly characterized as intentionally hurtful and innocently mischievous; Aunt Adelaide is portrayed as level-headed and reasonable except for when she is absurd), the overall impression that logic has no place in these books leads to the central point: none of these things matter, because the only thing that matters is being a good Christian daughter, regardless of what life brings. In *Elsie's Holidays at Roselands,* this manifests when Elsie refuses to read a secular book to an ill Horace on the Sabbath, a conflict that is materially nearly identical to the

piano incident in *Elsie Dinsmore* but which ends up being massively more dramatic in scope. He banishes Elsie from his presence until she bends to his will and nearly immediately takes at turn for the worse, which the whole family—and indeed even the narrative—openly blame on Elsie. "Elsie's resistance to his authority had excited him so much as to bring on a return of his fever; her absence fretted him, too, for no one else seemed to understand quite as well how to wait upon him; and besides, he was not altogether satisfied with himself; not entirely sure that the course he had adopted was the right one. Could he only have got rid of all doubts of the righteousness and justice of the sentence he had pronounced upon her, it would have been a great relief. He was very proud, a man of indomitable will, and very jealous of his authority."[26] Here, as happens occasionally throughout the novel, Finley interjects a moment of recognition that Horace is unreasonable—and that, perhaps, in rare moments of self-reflection, even he seems aware of it. As with the novel's other absurdities, however, there is the suggestion that this doesn't particularly matter. Even if Horace is not entirely right to punish Elsie, it remains his right to do so—even when such punishments veer into the realm of physical abuse, such as when he locks Elsie in his closet for the crime of daring to ask the same question twice, forgetting her there for hours.

If Horace has qualms about his treatment of Elsie (albeit qualms that seem inspired by his own wants, rather than Elsie's or any inherent sense of fairness), he is the only one. When Horace's condition takes a turn for the worse, the entirety of the Dinsmore family viciously blames Elsie. Even Adelaide, who normally works to even her brother's temper, says, in the face of her niece's tears, "'You may well cry, Elsie […] for it is all your fault, and if you are left and orphan, you may thank your own perverseness and obstinancy for it.'"[27]

When Horace recovers, Elsie remains unforgiven; he declares that Elsie will be ignored and dismissed until she "'[is] ready to submit to [his] authority […] but remember, *not till* then!"'[28] Despite this dramatic pronouncement, it is not clear what Horace wants as a representation of this submission. The opportunity to read to her father at his sickbed has passed, and Elsie dutifully follows every other order, just as she always has done. Elsie's sorrow begins to wear on her—she grows more ill and pale even as Dinsmore slowly recovers, and yet is consistently reminded by her family that not only is Dinsmore's continued weakness her own fault, but so is her own illness. Travilla alone is drawn to Elsie's side, after first attempting to convince her that the "little sin" of obeying her father over God is acceptable, only to be met with extensive quoting of scripture.

The struggle between father and daughter continues at length, until Horace ultimately escalates by declaring that Elsie is to "be banished entirely from the family circle," with simple meals taken in isolation, no books aside from schoolbooks and her Bible, and that he will forbid all members of the family from speaking to or even acknowledging her.[29] Lynne Valone theorizes the interaction between the evangelical child and family in evangelical novels of the nineteenth century, arguing that "the fantasized 'incomplete child' of the Evangelical reformers" either lived in an idealized domestic idyll or "[operated] as the catalyst to the creation of a healthy family."[30] The burden placed upon Elsie is somewhat heavier than even the responsibilities experienced by other children in the Evangelical texts that Valone discusses (in which children, often siblings, momentarily "fail in their duties towards each other, their parents, and God [to] emphasize how to best avoid and overcome the sinfulness to which all humans—but especially children—are subject") because she already knows these things, is already adept at concealing the

"feminine passion, hear [read as] 'anger,' [that] is to be feared and avoided as a disruption of domestic tranquility"—which Valone holds as *the* plot of the Evangelical children's novel.[31]

The middle of *Roselands* is consumed with the repetition of these interactions: Dinsmore demands perfect obedience, Elsie vows that she wishes to obey in everything except when those orders contradict the word of God, Dinsmore refuses, and Elsie preaches to various characters on why she cannot simply give in. The effect is Finley's tendency for repetition taken to an extreme; the same scene is essentially replicated over and over for hundreds of pages. The result is less a story than a very specific sermon—preached many, many times. The question then: if the characters fail to change and the plot fails to change, are the *Elsie Dinsmore* books even novels? The books are framed as such, of course—though as Michael McKeon notes, the ubiquity of the term 'novel' as used as equivalent to (much definitionally broader) terms like 'fiction' and 'narrative' has obscured the limits of the genre of the novel not only in common parlance but to an extent in scholarly discourse, as well. This use of 'fictional narrative' and 'the novel' as overlapping and indistinct terms is combatted by, per McKeon, the broad understanding of literary theory, as deployed in the structuralist and poststructuralist movements, in which "[treatment] as a local instance of a more universal activity, [has caused the novel to be] subsumed within narrative in such a way as to obscure or ignore its special, 'generic' and 'literary,' properties."[32] Meanwhile, the continued broad use of the term 'novel'—accompanied by the falling-away of other generic categories, such as the rapid disappearance of the term 'romance' as a narrative category in the American tradition—pushes at the limits of what makes novels a genre. McKeon writes, "For the novel genre to be 'coherent' in [terms of 'its own particular historical contingency

and context'] requires that it fulfill the demands that pertain to all historical things: namely, that it displays both the continuity of an integral entity and, within that continuity, the discontinuity that confirms its existence over time and space, its capacity to change without changing into something else."[33] Yet the particular generic constraints of what made a novel a novel were not the main motivation in the use of the term; 'novels,' even as the term lost its clear and concrete meaning, came to represent a form of women's fiction that was appropriate reading for girls and women. 'Lady novelists' arose to fill the space of the conduct books of the late eighteenth century with novels as an established feminine genre, one that was domestic, focused on a social struggle over what it meant to be a 'good' woman, and safe from worldly (masculine) concerns. Per Nancy Armstrong, "So well established did this kind of writing become, so thoroughly did the literate classes grant it approval over the other, older, and more prevalent varieties of fiction, that it eventually supplanted everything the novel had been."[34] By the late nineteenth century, the novel as a moralizing force for women (and, overwhelmingly, by women) became so entrenched as to all but erase the previous century's anxieties over the incompatibility of fiction and polite writing, appropriate for a feminine audience. For Finley to call her text a novel would have been, therefore, a political gesture designed to allude to a history of moralizing tests, a signifier of appropriateness that implies a long history of the dominance of white, middle-class, Christian ideology as being 'best' for girls and women. In this regard, referring to Finley's series as a collection of novels is enormously apt: like the books themselves, the term uses dominant cultural touchstones to obscure its own political history, which, by reinforcing its own obviousness, claims incontestability. If a novel is fiction good for women, then fiction good for women must be a novel. If *Elsie Dinsmore* is good for girls

(proto-women), then it must be a novel; if *Elsie Dinsmore* is a novel, it must be good for girls.

Such syllogism aside, the *Elsie* series nonetheless stretches the limits of even the broadest definition of what makes a novel. Elsie's static character, entirely lacking in personality, does not afford the individuality that is expected of a protagonist in a novel. Even Alcott's bad sequels demonstrate the loss of personality; when Jo becomes a bland automaton of mothering in *Little Men*, it is noticeable because she was previously vivacious, individual, and interesting. Elsie begins as an archetype of goodness and so remains. Her 'mistakes' do not reflect any long-term changes in her character because her character is too simplistic to allow for any small deviations. Any movement away from what makes Elsie Elsie would mean an abrupt departure—a disavowal of faith, an intentional misbehavior borne of spite, a renouncing of her father—that would disrupt Finley's narrative that moves relentlessly towards demonstrations of rightness, never away. Elsie is thus much more suited towards a role in a fairy tale or myth than that of a novel; she is a heroine more than a character, a symbol more than any sort of convincing representation of a person. The problem with the transference between these genres distills most obviously into length, followed closely by a question of plot. Even the longest examples of myth or fairy tale cannot hold up against Finley's extended series, and mythological epics rely on the movement of plot—and, crucially, the fatal flaws of their heroes, which Elsie notably lacks—in order to maintain movement in a narrative that centers on a relatively static central figure. In this regard, Elsie is projected as more saintly than even most Biblical figures themselves, who learn Christian values through the progress of their stories. Finley's texts look to take on the form of the novel as a signifier of respectability, for

the benefits of a mode viewed as synonymous with both appropriateness and entertainment, without paying heed to even the most basic tenant of the novel genre: that something—*anything*—must change. The result is a series of texts that are novels in name only, that encourage uncritical thinking and blind acceptance even while relying on the long traditions of literary subversion that allowed the novel to exist, become respectable, and emerge as a tool in the hands of women writers that gave them a public voice without rendering that voice an object of scandal.

While the logic that holds *Elsie* books crumples under the least amount of critical pressure, it remains that, under any reasonable metric of success, Finley's books were wildly successful at accomplishing their goals. The original publisher of the *Elsie* books, "Edward H. Dodd, claims that the series was 'one of the most profitable of all American publications,' asserting that it had sold at least five million copies and speculating that it thus would have reached more than 25 million readers.'" Though these numbers seem potentially hyperbolic, Allison Giffen further notes that the sales numbers only account for one of several publishers, rendering more realistic Dodd's claim that "spread over three generations [the Elsie readership] is nothing more nor less than a civilization."[35] Elsie readers thus replicated precisely as the book taught them to: intergenerationally, and with the vision of augmenting and spreading a particular brand of evangelical goodness always in sight. And while Elsie did fall out of fashion in the middle of the twentieth century, as evidenced by the Eudora Welty anecdote I reference at the beginning of this chapter, it regained popularity with the reemerging eminence of white Evangelicalism that reentered the national scene in the 1990s and beyond. They continue to be published, particularly via

Christian presses such as Mission City Press, who rebranded the original *Elsie* octet as *Elsie Dinsmore: A Life of Faith* between 1999 and 2007.

III. Correct Conversions: the Specter of Catholicism and Trusting the Plot in *Elsie's Holidays at Roselands*

The climax of the *Elsie's Holidays at Roselands* finally arrives when Horace leaves Elsie behind to prepare the new estate he has purchased and Adelaide, disturbed by Elsie's decline and attempting to shock her into submission once and for all, confesses that Dinsmore is no longer considering sending Elsie to a boarding school if she doesn't give in (already a prospect that terrifies Elsie, as it will separate her from her beloved father) but rather intends to send her to a convent to be educated. Elsie, much of whose "reading had been on the subject of Popery and Papal institutions; [who] had pored over histories of the terrible tortures of the Inquisition and stories of martyrs and captive nuns, until she had imbibed an intense horror and dread of everything connected with that form of error and superstition," is hysterical at the prospect, certain that she will be tortured and forced to convert to Catholicism.[36] This discussion of Elsie's reading, which has been previously focused on the Bible and *The Pilgrim's Progress*—which, despite the many Biblical horrors, have been discussed in the novel primarily through the dictates of how to be a good and proper Christian—puts a twist on the idea of what Elsie (a symbol of Evangelical duty) considers to be "appropriate" reading material. Violence and cruelty, rather than being a topic to hide from a child's eyes, become a necessary part of her education, lest she be tempted away from the right path of Christianity—Evangelical Protestantism—and into the "error and superstition" of the Catholic church, which is perhaps more insidious than other forms of religious failure (heresy and worldliness—other religions themselves do not get

any note in the *Elsie* books) due to its resemblance to "correct" Christianity. Allison Giffen traces the broader trajectory of Finley's anti-Catholic sentiment, more evident in Finley's little-known novel *Casella: or, The Children of the Valley* (1868) than in her much more popular *Elsie* books. Though Giffen notes that this episode in *Roselands* and a later brief incident in *Elsie's Children* in which Horace (somewhat ironically) tells tales of the "perversion of Protestant girls being educated in convents" are the most explicit mentions of anti-Catholic sentiment, she argues that anti-Catholicism pervades the first two *Elsie* novels through what she terms "perverse domesticity."[37] She cites the "series of increasingly torturous physical and psychological punishments that Elsie endures" at the hands of her father as "a powerful catalog of suffering," all of which Elsie bears without wavering for an instant in her absolute faith. Curiously, though, in a sharp contrast to both the punishments that Elsie fears may befall her should her father send her to a convent and the punishments actually suffered by Blanche, the pious sentimental heroine of *Casella*, Elsie does not once ever suspect cruel intentions from her father, even as he inflicts much of the same violence that is inflicted by the (evil) Father Ignatius.[ix] In fact, Elsie barely seems to mind the physical punishments except for as representation of the loss of her father's love, even as she lives in such terror over the same punishments at the hands of nuns that she falls into a decline. The significant difference, it seems, is paternity itself,

[ix] Per Giffen: "Both girls are threatened with whips, limited to bread and water, and then consigned to solitary confinement; Blanche is also graphically and brutally beaten. Both girls weep many tears, though they never submit, and become pale and weakened by their persecution. Finally, both descend into a brain fever, and the sight of their ravaged bodies effects conversion upon those around them" (6). Though the actual beating of Blanche is a clear increase of the violence and cruelty suffered by the two girls, the similarities between their treatment is undeniable. Yet, though neither of the two perpetrators are beyond redemption, signified by conversion, the *Elsie* books insist that readers not find ill intention in Horace's actions. Father Ignatius acts out of a perverse desire to spread the reach of a perverse religion, but Father Dinsmore acts out of love.

rather than intent; the 'fathers' in both of Finley's novels seek to coerce the heroines away from their strict observances and towards the worship of false idols. Nor is the significant difference susceptibility to conversion. Both men are ultimately converted to proper Protestantism as they must be—any other ending would cast doubt upon the pathos of the sentimental evangelical heroine or, worse, on the power of a righteous and true god.

Elsie's mental distress exerts itself on her body to the point that a doctor is summoned; he can find no physical cause and asks, "Has she any mental trouble? She seems to me like one who has some weight of care or sorrow pressing upon her, and sapping the very springs of life. She appears to have no desire to recover; she needs something to rouse her, and revive her love of life. *Is* there anything on her mind? If so, it must be removed, or she will certainly die."[38] Adelaide writes letter after letter to Horace, to no response, while Elsie spends many pages alternately mourning her own sinfulness and proclaiming her love for those around her—including the father who has abandoned her, who is never at fault—and welcoming her reunion with Christ. Even as she is increasingly lost to delirium, however, Elsie maintains her nearly perfect obedience to her father, and will not disobey his orders even to save her own life—when the doctor suggests removing her hair to help curb her fever, Elsie, in a moment of lucidity, refuses to allow her curls to be cut, recalling her father's dictate that they are *his* curls, merely growing out of Elsie's head, and therefore only he can give such permission.

In these chapters, Finley takes the drama and sentiment of a deathbed scene and wrings it for every ounce of pathos it is worth, extending the precipice of death across multiple chapters. While individually, each of Elsie's cries of despair that she will never again feel her father's love contain a wrenching note of sentimentalism, the effect does not

multiply en masse. Elsie, for all her angelic devotion and saintly kindness too all around her, is no Little Eva—she is too central to the plot to be so. Finley does make some definitive nods to Stowe when Elsie asks Adelaide to write a list of bequeaths she hopes her father will make with the money from her mother that was to become hers when she reached her majority (even though "'I know I have no *right*, because I am so young.'"[39] Elsie requests "'support [for] one missionary to the heathen'" and to "take care of [her] poor old mammy as long as she lives and [that] for his little Elsie's sake, he will be very, *very* kind to her, and give her everything she wants.'" She further asks that he "'do something for Mrs. Murray, too.'"[40] Finley's references to slavery become less veiled in this second installment—Elsie's differing addresses of Aunt Chloe and Mrs. Murray make it clear that one is enslaved and one is not, though all are insistently referred to as "servants" at Roselands—and she makes liberal use of vernacular whenever any of the enslaved characters speak. Elsie's attempt to see the people her family has enslaved cared for—though, because the text has not officially recognized that they are enslaved, she cannot ask for their freedom from bondage—hearkens back not only to Little Eva, but to a broader tradition of antislavery literature in the nineteenth century in which a "benevolent" slaveowner promises lifelong care (or more likely freedom) but dies before anything official can be done. The effect is rather politically lackluster; for all that Finley alludes to abolitionist sentiment via the century's most recognizable anti-slavery novel, she is writing post-abolition—the utility of Stowe's sentimental and racist vision of why abolition should occur and proposal for how the country should treat formerly enslaved Black people no longer applies. Yet Finley clearly invokes the "badges and incidents of slavery" in her crafting of a pastoral antebellum South, using slavery as a means to demonstrate the

goodness and kindness of her white heroine—while disguising "goodness" as something that is falsely apolitical. Ultimately, Finley fails to even go so far as to portray slavery, as an institution, as wrong. Though Elsie will later fall afoul of the Klu Klux Klan, due to her kind treatment and generous wages paid to the formerly enslaved workers on her estate (all of whom, to a man, choose to stay with her after abolition), the implication is more heavily that it is un-Christian racist violence (characterized not dissimilarly to Elsie's horror of Catholicism as an ideology of misappropriated Christian values) that is the true sin, rather than slavery itself—with Elsie, of course, cast as the ultimate victim of such violence.

Finley's preference here for highlighting the violence done against her white protagonist even while callously disregarding the violence of slavery of which she is obviously aware echoes throughout the later volumes of the series. This can be most evidently seen in *Elsie's Womanhood*, when the timeline of the books aligns with that of the Civil War. In her preface—one of the rare moments where Finley allows her political attentions to be explicit—Finley expresses both a reluctance to discuss the war while glossing over the larger political concerns that led to war as well as the struggles of early Reconstruction—well apparent by the time Finely is writing in 1903.

> The call for a sequel to "Elsie's Girlhood" having become too loud and importunate to be resisted, the pleasant task of writing it was undertaken.
>
> Dates compelled the bringing in of the late war: and it has been the earnest desire and effort of the author to so treat the subject as to wound the feelings of none; to be as impartial as if writing history; and, by drawing a true, though alas, but faint picture, of the great losses and sufferings on both sides, to make the very thought of a renewal of the awful strife *utterly abhorrent* to every lover of humanity, and especially of this, our own dear native land.
>
> Are we not one people: speaking the same language; worshipping the one true and living God; having a common history, a common ancestry; and united by the tenderest ties of blood? And is not this great grand, glorious old Union—known and respected all over the world—our common country, our joy and pride? O! let us forget all bitterness, and live henceforth in love, harmony, and mutual helpfulness. […]

> Yet what need to balance accounts in respect to these matters? The unnatural strife is over, and we are again one united people.[41]

Inclusion and exclusion are here wielded with weaponlike precision, both in terms of what counts as historical context and who constitutes audience. As is regularly the case with Finely, extratextual elements clarify elements often obfuscated—intentionally—in her main texts. In this preface, Finley's use of "our" is fairly transparently used, particularly as deployed under the definition of "one people: speaking the same language; worshipping the one true and living God; having a common history, a common ancestry; and united by the tenderest ties of blood." The nation is Christian, white, Anglophone—a group of people who have "native" ownership of what constitutes "America." Her exhortation to "forget all bitterness" performs the same shift as do her books, moving any emotional response to the progress of history from the realm of the historical to that of the personal, and rendering any desire to recognize the problems of the past (which, of course, are direct cause of the problems of the present) as a personal failure, as an inability to forgive. Personal affect thus rules supreme—but it is the feeling of not only white people, but of a certain type of white person that matters, who Finely counts when she desires to "wound the feelings of none." Finley's language here reveals an awareness of who made up the bulk of her readership: white girls who, overwhelmingly, came from the North and who would be able and willing to pretend that a conflict that did not affect their daily lives (or at least not in the relatively more transparent ways that the politics of Reconstruction lived on in the South), for whom the reminder that an enormous racial conflict existed was a tiresome narrative device, best left in the past. In framing the "unnatural strife" as being over, Finley isolates the war from its causes and effects—a necessary construct in order to support the idyll of her previous installments, and to further the vision of Elsie's domestic power as untouched (or, at the

very least, minimally touched) by the corrupting forces of the outside world. The force of history is thus, on the surface at least, something to be resisted; despite the pleasure of the task, Finely puts up a front of resistance to having written about the Civil War at all. It is only through the exhortation of readers, "too loud and importunate to be resisted," that she gives in to addressing the most significant historical event of the century. Finely here reveals the profoundly middle-class ethos that shape her texts, in which unpleasant emotions are to be suppressed unless then can be solved by individual affect management; railing against (or even acknowledging) systemic historical problems is 'making a scene,' something that challenges the sanguinity and ultimate effectiveness of the sentimental heroine, who fixes the world with her tears and grows into a placid, loving mother with a calming, endlessly patient touch. If something cannot be repaired by personal feeling (feeling right, behaving right) then it becomes an unsuitable topic, needlessly incendiary. Sentiment again proves to be the only limiting factor for the *Elsie* books—as well as the force that structures Elsie as the central victim of all suffering, whether historical, personal, or spiritual.

Yet, as much as it is expansive, sentiment *does* pose a limiting factor in terms of the ways in which an audience can reasonably be asked to connect to the emotions of the characters—or, put differently, to follow the thread of the only plot that truly matters. In the conclusion of *Elsie's Holidays, at Roselands,* Elsie again comes up against the limit of a sentimental heroine in a girlhood novel; though she can suffer and ail, she cannot actually die, cannot pass from the role of a human (and therefore inherently sinful, albeit extremely pious) girl to the memory of one, who may, after death, leave behind the memories and thus the effects of her piety without the inconvenient necessity of having to live as an

imperfect human being. Moreover, the audience knows that Elsie cannot die—she is not like Beth in *Little Women*, where other girls can occupy the protagonist role—and so they cannot fear for her, do not resonate with Horace's desperate panic once he finally receives the letters telling of Elsie's illness (his apparent lack of caring having been nothing more than narrative misdirection designed to ensure Elsie suffers even further). The concluding episodes of *Roselands* reveal particularly clearly that the *Elsie* series is not particularly interested in the continuity of its own plot; anything can be sacrificed in the name of maximizing Elsie's uncomplaining, Christlike suffering and the larger conversion narrative that it inspires. Thus, when Horace desperately reevaluates his behavior in light of the fear that his beloved daughter may die—"[he] had thus far persuaded himself that he was only using the legitimate authority of a parent, and therefore acting quite right; and, in fact, with the truest kindness, because, as he reasoned she would be happier all her life if once relieved from the supposed necessity of conforming to rules so strict and unbending"—it does not matter that he has spent several hundred pages attempting to force onto Elsie an equally strict and unbending authority: absolute submission to his own will. When he rationalizes that Elsie will surely live, since she has "always been healthy," it does not matter that she has been ill the entire book, worn down by her father's disdain, and when he proclaims that "God is too merciful to send me to terrible an affliction," it doesn't matter that Horace has never before been known to either pray or entrust himself to god—nor indeed that this is not the first time that he has nearly lost his daughter due to his own stubbornness. The only thing that matters is that Elsie's efforts to convert her father are finally working; everything else is so secondary as to be immaterial.

Stricken at the near-loss of his daughter, Horace solemnly vows to become a Christian like his beloved Elsie—a vow that, as readers, we are meant to take seriously, even though this precise drama has occurred in the previous installment. We are similarly meant to believe in Horace's Christianity when he and Elsie continually reenact the drama of pitting paternal authority against holy authority; even if Horace acts in the same tyrannical, high-handed manner as he has in the previous books, a role that becomes more and more disturbing as Elsie ages into adolescence and womanhood, readers are meant to understand that he is a Christian now simply because he says so. The reach of fatherly authority is thus extratextual. A father's authority is to be questioned only when another father (indeed, the Father) has commands that stand in direct opposition. The *Elsie* readership becomes well-trained in this edict. If Horace says something is true, it is true, so long as God does not disagree. The subsequent installments in the *Elsie* series do not entirely neglect a change in Horace, however. Once he becomes (at least nominally) Christian—though he does not veer quite into the levels of heretical defiance of the first two books in the series, neither does post-conversion Horace ever go to extreme lengths to demonstrate his piety; while he may refer to finding comfort in prayer, he never becomes inclined to Elsie-level depictions of physical and mental anguish brought on by the force of his faith—the extremity of the conflict in *Elsie's Holidays at Roselands* is never again reached, not because Horace's authority relaxes, but because it is *strengthened* by his turn to religion. In *Elsie's Girlhood*, the installment that takes her from approximately age ten to her marriage at eighteen, Elsie and Horace once again clash over Horace's authority, this time over a suitor who pursues Elsie. Horace is convinced that this young suitor, a college friend of Elsie's ne'er-do-well cousin Arthur, is only interested in Elsie for her money.

Purehearted Elsie, meanwhile, is certain that there is goodness in everyone that is, if not already at the surface, simply waiting to break free—after all, hasn't she successfully converted her father? Elsie's impulses towards endless charity are disproven, however, and she narrowly escapes the marriage snare her cousin and his friend have set. Despite the many tears she sheds (not necessarily over the lost suitor himself as much as over the realization that such dishonesty exists in the world), Elsie settles happily into her engagement to Travilla by the end of the book.

This scaling-back of dramatic tension (as much as adolescent Elsie weeps, it does not bring her close to death; as much as Horace is disturbed by Elsie's willful desire to see the best in others even when he clearly sees their poor intentions, he does not shun his daughter with his previous vitriol) in *Elsie's Girlhood* reveals how the highly episodic nature of the series resists the developmental pull that the maturation plot avows. In this third installment, Horace's love is ensured for the first time, and the force of his fatherly affection is only intensified by his marriage to the devout Rose Allison, who has been Elsie's mother figure even before her reunion with her father. Rose, who seamlessly fills the role of the family's pious center, not only providing Elsie for the first time with a reliable source of (white) maternal affection, but also liberates Elsie from her role as little wife to her own father. At last, there is someone else responsible for Horace's moral conduct, leaving Elsie the opportunity to be a child for the first time in her life. *Elsie's Girlhood* could thus be considered a movement backwards in terms of maturation of character as easily as it could be seen as movement forwards in terms of legible milestones of maturity. Elsie may be seeking a husband, but she is no less innocent than in her earlier childhood. Indeed, it is only in *Elsie's Girlhood*, once the fate of her own family's religious convictions are secure,

that Elsie is able to properly exhibit any naïveté: though she is equally convinced of the goodness of her father and her suitor, the difference remains that in the case of her suitor, she is wrong. By bringing her father into the path of righteousness, Elsie places herself in a position in which she, in fact, knows even less than she did when she was younger in terms of acting as a moral authority. All her biblical quoting and religious philosophizing is meaningless when Horace is capable of the same. Elsie's moral accomplishments are thus both the only thing that matters to the series, and completely immaterial. As much as it remains her task to spread goodness, as soon as that goodness is spread, her influence is diminished in the face of the authority of a godly man. Under these conditions, it is essentially impossible for Elsie to move forward in any way besides the nominal; she is, and will remain, as she is presented in the first pages of the first book. Elsie is nearly perfect, a state that is both very important and entirely static, rendered interesting only through the narrative's conviction that she is a compelling character.

Each episode, though concerned with the trajectory of Elsie's maturation, remains in this way self-contained, so that the emotional drama of Horace's religious convictions can be re-enacted whenever needed to demonstrate Elsie's loyalty to both her father and Christ. Elsie, in turn, is trapped in a chronology controlled by her father, in which he restrains her to childhood by dictating her dress, hair, and friendships—and ultimately by ensuring that she enters a marriage based first and foremost in paternalistic authority framed as love.

IV. The Travelogues

Martha Finley's *Elsie* series was an enormous financial success, its popularity continuing even after eight books tracked Elsie from childhood to womanhood and to life

as a widow and grandmother. Despite the lack of clear direction for Elsie's future—what is the purpose of a woman, after all, when she has already passed her childbearing and -rearing years?—Finely continued to write an additional twenty volumes about Elsie's adventures in her later years. The maturation plot, as troubled as it may be, becomes entirely inaccessible and Finely, accordingly, disregards even the appearance of a linear plot. Rather, the later installments, which I term the travelogues, due to their overwhelming interest in sending Elsie into new locales as the central plot, are enormously episodic, depicting an elderly Elsie (who never seems to perceptibly age; she is old, but not too old for her traveling) spending time in various places with various friends, existing in the world as a model of Evangelical propriety.

Because these installments do not follow the model of the maturation serial, I do not give them much attention in this project. Yet their very existence, let alone their relative success (though never as popular as the bestselling early *Elsie* books, the later installments provided Finley with a nice income for the remainder of her life) suggests much about the grip that the maturation plot had on nineteenth-century publishing. The continuation of the *Elsie* series depends almost entirely on the popularity of Elsie as a character, which, in turn, speaks to the legibility of the sentimental heroine as a figure capable of capturing and retaining the affection of her audience, even when, as discussed previously in this chapter, that character is a barely-there puppet with the sole purpose of modeling Evangelical propriety. Finley is again able to rely on the expectations of genre—even after she has moved away from everything that reasonably structures that genre, no matter how troubled those structures may be—to bolster the non-plot of her not-novels and still have them received as a success. The temporality of the maturation serial thus inverts itself in

the later *Elsie* books; the premise of the maturation serial depends on the future of who the central girl character will be as she advances into womanhood, and Finley's travelogues rely on the memory of who Elsie was, back when she had the promises and milestones of womanhood ahead of her. The force of the maturation narrative as a thing that gives structure to a woman's life as an extension to, but not a rewriting of, the marriage plot thus shows its capacity to create meaning not only from an anticipation of the future (whose events are therefore not guaranteed) but also from a (mis)remembering of the past that creates a sense of character out of little more than tropes, and that engenders in its readers a love for such a character enough to sustain her afterlife for decades' worth of publications.

V: Coda

The maturation serial is a genre made almost entirely out of problems; yet, for both authors and audiences, these problems seem to not be a problem at all. Rather it is the navigation of the impossibilities—how to grow up when you can't, how to avoid growing up when you must, how to change without changing—that provide the structure and shape for the various iterations of the genre. The means by which authors choose to delay or resist the pull of maturation (Montgomery), give in to the societal prescription through which it is depicted (Finley), or outright reject the concept of its linearity (Alcott) are the things that make the maturation serial generative, productive, interesting. And while resistance to the pulls of the maturation plot have proven to offer texts a greater longevity and popularity across generations, given that Alcott and Montgomery have remained, without question, far more culturally relevant and with fewer disruptions than has Finley, rejections or deferrals of traditional norms of sentimental womanhood are not obligatory

in order to craft a successful, generative, or profitable example of the maturation serial. Rather, the central questions of the maturation serial—what does it mean to grow up as a girl? What does it mean for a girl to grow up?—linger because they cannot be answered. Yet we cannot seem to keep ourselves from asking, time and again, generation after generation.

However, if the problems of the genre are not a problem, neither does an answer seem to be the answer; the maturation serial does not grab our attention despite the absence of a definitive conclusion but rather because of it. Girl readers encountering *Little Women* for the first time, whether in the nineteenth century or the twenty first, are both tasked with navigating a world tinged with the same sentimental views towards girlhood (an identity of its own yet also a steppingstone on the way to womanhood, both sacralized and loathed) and the same questions about what growing up may mean (to the self, in the world). Finding an answer to these questions is not the point; rather, the community generated by asking them is. The maturation serial thus operates in layers of transparency and illogic. Beneath any surface simplicity of the storytelling are minefields of contradictions, oddities, and beguiling assumptions. Yet deeper still is a certain clarity, because we recognize the genre, and we know what it's doing. Impossibility is thus the thing that gives the maturation serial its shape, that suggests that what engages us is not girls' successes into growing into women—how could it be, when these successes are so transparently absent—but rather their failures that keeps our interest in fictional girls, and our continued hunger for them, alive and well.

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[1] Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings..* Harvard University Press, 1995, 40.
[2] Martha Finley, *Elsie's Girlhood.* 1872. Hendrickson Publishers, 2009, i.

[3] Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs : the Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, 123, 150-151
[4] Isabelle Lehuu, " Sentimental Figures : Reading *Godey's Lady's Book* in Antebellum America" The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in 19th-Century America (ed. Shirley Samuels) 82.
[5] Martha Finley, *Elsie Dinsmore*. 1867. Hendrickson Publishers, 2009, 11.
[6] (14)
[7] *(*13-4)
[8] (23)
[9] (22)
[10] (204)
[11] (57)
[12] (69)
[13] *Elsie's Girlhood* 368-369
[14] (369)
[15] (369-70)
[16] (370)
[17] (371)
[18] (371)
[19] Martha Finley, *Elsie's Womanhood.* 1875. Hendrickson Publishers, 2009, 2.
[20] *Elsie Dinsmore* 168
[21] (191)
[22] (227)
[23] Martha Finley, *Elsie's Holidays at Roselands*. 1868. Hendrickson Publishers, 2009, 13-14.
[24] (14)
[25] (17)
[26] (90)
[27] (97)
[28] (109)
[29] (134)
[30]Lynne Vallone. *Disciplines of Virtue: Girls` Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*. Yale University Press, 1995, 78.
[31] (78-9)
[32] Michael McKeon, *Theory of the Novel : a Historical Approach / Edited by Michael McKeon.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000, xiv.
[33] (xiv)
[34] Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. Oxford UP, 1990, 105
[35] Dodd, Edward H. *The First Hundred Years: A History of the House of Dodd, Mead, 1839–1939*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1939. Qtd in Giffen, Allison. "Lessons Learned: Genre and Paternal Desire in Martha Finley's Elsie Dinsmore Series." *Romantic Education in Nineteenth-Century American Literature: National and Transatlantic Contexts*, Routledge, pp. 245–59, 1, 19.
[36] *Elsie's Holidays at Roselands* 196
[37] Martha Finley, *Elsie's Children*. 1877. Hendrickson Publishers, 2009, 128; Giffen 4
[38] *Elsie's Holidays at Roselands* 205
[39] (210)
[40] (210)
[41] Martha Finley, *Elsie's Womanhood.* 1875. Hendrickson Publishers, 2009, i.

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APPENDIX: List of *Elsie Dinsmore* Titles

"Core" eight *Elsie* Titles

These first eight *Elsie* books follow the most clearly linear 'maturation' plot, tracking Elsie through all the 'appropriate' of levels of feminine maturation, including ensuring that her own children grow into proper parents. This octet is the most commonly reprinted selection of the *Elsie* books and was republished by an evangelical press in the 1990s as *Elsie Dinsmore: A Life of Faith* under different set of titles, listed below. It is partially due to this publication history that I mark the end of the "core" series at the end of book eight rather than book nine, though it is not until book ten, *Elsie at Nantucket*, where Elsie embarks on her first large travel expedition. This division is also due to the more episodic nature of the latter books, further detailed below.

1. *Elsie Dinsmore* (1867)
2. *Elsie's Holidays at Roselands* (1868)
3. *Elsie's Girlhood* (1872)
4. *Elsie's Womanhood* (1875)
5. *Elsie's Motherhood* (1876)
6. *Elsie's Children* (1877)
7. *Elsie's Widowhood* (1880)
8. *Grandmother Elsie* (1882)

Elsie Dinsmore: A Life of Faith Titles

Despite title differences, the *Life of Faith* books are virtually identical to the originals.

1. *Elsie's Endless Wait* (1999)
2. *Elsie's Impossible Choice* (1999)
3. *Elsie's New Life* (1999)
4. *Elsie's Stolen Heart* (1999)
5. *Elsie's True Love* (2000)
6. *Elsie's Troubled Times* (2000)
7. *Elsie's Tender Mercies* (2001)
8. *Elsie's Great Hope* (2001)

"Travelogues"

Though not every single of the installments that I refer to as the "travelogues" involves Elsie travelling to a new location, the vast majority of them do, as is evidenced by their titles. More centrally, however, these installments veer away from even the appearance of the maturation storyline; each is essentially interchangeable, with the small exception of introductions of characters that reappear later (see installments fifteen and sixteen, which both include Elsie's friends the Raymonds). Unlike the first eight books, however, Elsie does not perceptibly age during these installments (despite their being twice as many as in

the first group) and the series does not progress towards any clear objective. Publication of these installments only ended due to Finley's death in 1906.

9. *Elsie's New Relations* (1883)
10. *Elsie at Nantucket* (1884)
11. *The Two Elsies* (1885)
12. *Elsie's Kith and Kin* (1886)
13. *Elsie's Friends at Woodburn* (1887)
14. *Christmas with Grandma Elsie* (1888)
15. *Elsie and the Raymonds* (1889)
16. *Elsie Yachting with the Raymonds* (1890)
17. *Elsie's Vacation* (1891)
18. *Elsie at Viamede* (1892)
19. *Elsie at Ion* (1893)
20. *Elsie at the World's Fair* (1894)
21. *Elsie's Journey on Inland Waters* (1895)
22. *Elsie at Home* (1897)
23. *Elsie on the Hudson* (1898)
24. *Elsie in the South* (1899)
25. *Elsie's Young Folks* (1900)
26. *Elsie's Winter Trip* (1902)
27. *Elsie and Her Loved Ones* (1903)
28. *Elsie and Her Namesakes* (1905)