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Vassar College

“Pathetic and impressive”:

Recovering the Role of American Sentimental Novels in the
Fiction/Morality Conflict

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Introduction

The sentimental domestic novel, which I will here be redefining as the sentimental novel, was a major force in popular literature of antebellum America. At a time when the printing and reading of literature was burgeoning in America, sentimental novels, especially those written by women, were America's first bestsellers. They were read by millions of Americans in the antebellum period. Because they participated in greater discourses about the role and value of literature in a formative American period, I argue that sentimental novels are literarily as well as academically valuable.¹ I find this argument necessary because the modern scholarly response tends to dismiss sentimental novels. Even a hundred years after the sentimental novel's prominence, Fred Pattee read them as prioritizing feeling over thinking in a way that threatened the serious ambitions of American literature—indeed, this position echoes the contemporary response of critics like Nathaniel Hawthorne and F. T. Palgrave who deigned them to be unworthy of the serious American literary tradition (Dobson 282). In the 1970s, Ann Douglas accused sentimental writers of dangerously “feminizing” American culture and blames them for modern weaknesses in mass media. Suzanne Clark approached sentimental writing as a tool in the 1990s, formulating it as the adversary against which modernism defines its avant-garde, rigorous aesthetics. Others simply describe sentimental writing as “popular fiction” and leave it there, as if a work that is widely-

¹ I leave arguments over their aesthetic value to anyone who can confidently define the purpose and characteristics of art such that they can make hard distinctions between what is and is not art.

read or loved by the masses is automatically less literary, or less aesthetically and academically valuable. “Sympathy” and “melodrama” are used pejoratively to describe a fundamentally emotional, feminine discourse that falls short of hegemonic—and male-dominated/male-defined—standards of academic and literary value.

In the wake of the canon wars, a smattering of scholars has attempted to recover the sentimental novel for teaching and nuanced scholarly consideration. Each scholar made important advances in the understanding of these novels, but none successfully brought them into mainstream consideration. Nina Baym (1978) tried to bring forth the historical prominence of the genre in contemporary conceptions of womanhood, but failed to view the genre as a diverse aesthetic, instead approaching the sentimental novel as a monolithic cultural discourse disproportionately focused on the domestic. Jane Tompkins (1986) argued that the sentimental novel performs important “cultural work” in representing the moral concerns and cultural orientations of contemporary society, and this argument does do a good job in bringing sentimental novels into academic discourse for a period. However, this approach also falls short of legitimizing the genre as works deliberately created with artistic or literary goals, and instead risks relegating them to the academic and aesthetic status of a historical artifact, similar to a ship manifest or a land deed. Most recently, Joanne Dobson (1997) and later Faye Halpern (2015) argue that the emotional rhetoric of sentimental novels contributed to the moral compass of a nation, but each of these authors places sentimental novels in some way outside of the conventional understanding of academic or literary value while also focusing more on their cultural

effects than on the subjectivities and voices of the women who produce them. The fact that these works participated in the debates over the role of the novel is itself important; however, it is key also to understand the way that this gendered rhetoric of sympathy necessarily communicated primarily from women authors to women readers through female characters. Sentimental novels are not simply women's literature, but neither can they be separated during analysis from the women who created them and the women who read them. The act/identity of authorship and the reading communities that developed around these works are key to understanding their impact.

However, all of these sallies on behalf of the sentimental novel have failed to fully recover this literature in a way that integrates it meaningfully into serious scholarship that attends to sentimental novels' value in both historic and ongoing debates about the nature of literature. This literature has been met either with apathetic silence or reiterations of the aesthetic shortcomings of the genre. Few American universities offer undergraduate classes on American sentimental writing of the early to mid-19th century, or even American literature survey courses that include the topic. Sentimental novels' meaningful contributions to the debates about the role of literature are rarely touched on or appreciated. Even when they are included, it is often as a foil to realism or as a nod to "women's fiction," rather than as a vital part of American literary development. Of the English syllabi compiled by the Open Syllabus Project (out of Columbia University), 570 of them assign Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," while only nine have ever assigned *Ruth Hall*. Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, one of America's first bestselling

novels, appears on only 12 out of hundreds of thousands of English class syllabi (“Open Syllabus Explorer”). According to the only available tool for quantifying the frequency of text assignments in English courses, undergraduates are about fifty times more likely to have read one Hawthorne story than to have read a sentimental novel which was more purchased, read, and discussed in antebellum America than any of Hawthorne’s works (*Women’s Fiction*).

This classroom exclusion is the primary symptom of the fact that none of the previous scholarship on sentimental novels has successfully and accurately recovered the real value of the genre. Each of these previous scholarly works has attempted to recover sentimental fiction by proposing a way in which these works can be valuable without being considered valuable literature, or be literature only under special considerations. All of these scholars in some way attempt to remove sentimental works from normative categories of literary, aesthetic, or scholarly value—they seem to concede that sentimental novels are inherently flawed according to these categories, but still valuable if these categories are avoided or reimagined. However, I contend that a deeper investigation of the cultural contexts of these novels, including all their diverse forms and arguments, will reveal that they are academically valuable without the need to consider them outside of traditional standards of literary value (as Tompkins does with her formulation of “cultural work”).

Several different schemas are traditionally used to determine these rubrics of value. Proponents of the traditional canon like Harold Bloom insist that great literature deals with “universal” themes, emotions, and aesthetic values. As Bourdieu has pointed out, however, this universality of the reading subject is no longer

guaranteed in a world that hopes to include subaltern voices (and it was probably never really true). If not by universality, then, by what standard are valuable works measured? One solid rubric for evaluating works outside the traditional (outdated) canon is by seeing in what ways they participate in the greater narrative of the timeline of critical thought about literature. Works like *Don Quixote* and “Self-Reliance” are often read to inform the development of a certain literary canon/sensibility or aesthetic qualities. Indeed, the value of these aesthetics is judged, as Bourdieu and Baym have contended, by necessarily exclusive and patriarchal standards. By the rubric of value that considers a works’ contributions to key debates about literary sensibilities, then, sentimental novels are worth serious scholarly investigation and greater inclusion in teaching. What makes a work or collection of works more valuable than the fact that they have shaped literary history, our very understandings of aesthetic value, artistic rhetoric, and cultural narratives? One way for scholars to understand 19th century literary change in America is to construct a genealogy of literary orientations toward morality which must necessarily include the sentimental domestic. Sentimental novels engage with contemporary literary debates about the potential, risks, and roles of reading and authorship in America, confronting issues like the morality of the novel, the role of public emotionality, and the authorial voices of women, or even their rights to such voices in the public sphere. Particularly in contemporary periodicals like *Knickerbocker* and *The North American Review*, the critics and pundits of the day were struggling to define the role and nature of fiction. Contentious arguments arose over whether fiction should moralize—and if so, how? What value did reading fiction have in relationship to reading other genres, from

history to sermons? What place, if any, should women be afforded in these debates? None of the commentators could agree on these fundamental debates around the formation of antebellum literary tradition and reading culture.

Sentimental authors explore these debates through their very use of sentimentalism, a gendered mode of communication because of the voices it privileges and the consumers who embraced it—namely, the authorial voices and interiority of women as well as the reading communities of reading that grew around these works. This engagement is particularly visible in the ways these authors handle their characters' encounters with reading and writing, be it a novel, a letter, or their own sense of authorship. By having sentimental characters whose moral, emotional, and psychological engagements with reading and writing are made available to (and ask for the participation of) the reader, sentimental novels are able to work through these important controversies of literary theory in a way that includes and amplifies women's authorial voices.

In the early 19th century, literary periodicals were awash with articles and editorials on the moral danger of fiction, and how it should best be addressed. Some like William Alcott contended that nearly all novel reading is a waste of time, writing that it is “better for young men who have little leisure for reading...to abandon novels wholly. If they begin to read them, it is difficult to tell to what an excess they may go” (Alcott 204). Some, like the *Ladies Repository* magazine, alleged that because of novel reading, “Hearts that ought to remain as pure and uncontaminated as the Alpine snows, are stained with impurity of thought and imaginations” (qtd. in *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers* 180). On the other hand, a reviewer from the 1859 *Atlantic*

argued that novel fiction, “dealing with the subjects it does, must work good or evil,” depending on the “tendency” of the author (qtd. in *Novels* 184). This reviewer indicates an alternative view: the author has a moral responsibility to model correct moral behavior in his or her fiction, and thus the moral nature of a novel varies according to its author who purported to teach morality through the struggles of imperfect characters.

These critics could not quite decide on what they meant by “moral,” each applying whatever moral system best suited him or her. In this paper, when I say “moral” I am referring to whatever ethical code and/or code of conduct the author or character is trying to impose. Susan Warner’s “morals” are different from those of Fanny Fern, but each sees themselves as imparting moral wisdom to some degree. Indeed, they most often do so through placing their protagonists in communities of moral guides or reading communities, which co-developed standards of emotional expression and behavior which rested more on ties of love and duty than on authority. Sentimental authors draw readers into the moral world they have created (which may or may not suit the morally-outraged critics of novels) using sympathy.

Indeed, the moral potential of fiction was not discussed in a vacuum—critics were quick to point out that fiction did not spring into being or exist without human interaction. The role of the author and the responsibilities of the reader were also at issue. Various advice was given to novelists on the appropriate delivery of their moral. The *Literary World* magazine asserted that the moral lessons of novels should be “implied rather than forced on the reader’s mind” (qtd. in *Novels* 136). Other voices of authority, like *Putnam’s*, insisted that emotional rhetoric was key for a

“pathetic [in the sense of arousing compassion] and impressive.” Still others, while acknowledging the key role of a moral tendency in a novel, were more willing to admit that “we read novels, first of all, to be amused” (qtd. in *Novels* 124). Further, both writers and reviewers saw the response of the reader to the work as key to defining its moral potential and its influence on the individual. Audiences engaged in social activities directed by their reading (like book discussion groups) and the guidance of proper literacy among young people was a subject of much debate and writing (Alcott). The sentimental novel engages in these debates about the moral nature of the novel, the responsibility and technique of the author, and the influence of reading and other literate behaviors on the reader. In the official discourses and the contributions of sentimental writers, the moral role of fiction implicates the nature of American reading culture in general.

In order to move forward in my analysis, I must define a few terms. First, I will refer to the genre as “sentimental fiction” instead of “sentimental domestic fiction.” While domestic values are at the core of the moral systems of many sentimental novels, I believe that the putative relationship between the sentimental novel and the “cult of domesticity” is overstated and its supremacy is a symptom of their academic neglect, as the diverse novels treated in this paper will show. Sentimental heroines are more likely to study, pray, or think than they are to cook, clean, or parent. Even heroines forced to work in homes because of American chattel slavery—like Harriet Jacobs—are far more vocal about their minds and faith than they are about housekeeping and home life. Additionally, I will be dealing with a particular 19th century understanding of “sympathy” which differs from the modern

connotations. In sentimental fiction, “sympathy” is not merely an emotion, but is also a relationship between the reader and the text (or a particular character) that requires the reader to feel sadness for a character’s misfortunes (often regardless of a character’s own level of optimism), and often has the goal of moving the reader to action, whether it be prayer, charity, or moral reform. “Sympathy” requires a self-aware emotional response from a reader who feels connected enough to the characters to be affected by their emotions but also distanced enough to feel emotions about them, like pity or admiration. This unique emotional connection, created through sentimental styles, allows for both didactic writing and (sometimes “or”) engaging, complex characters. Sentimental style consists, essentially, of the deployment of sympathetic characters (those with whom the author can identify, which are usually women) and the use of sympathy to engage the emotional responses of the reader. These responses can range from identification to pity, but mostly center on goodwill, and some measure of admiration, for the protagonist. The sentimental style is not only used didactically in some novels, but is also used to create a community of readers, writers, and characters whose shared emotional and life experiences constitute a community of literacy through which cultural, moral, and personal selves and relationships are negotiated. The contemporary debate over the value and role of fiction is visibly and meaningfully worked through within this community of feeling and thought constituted by sentimental readers, writers, and characters. Finally, I am expanding the meaning of the word “literacy” in the context of this work in lieu of an existing word that adequately describes my meaning. In this work, “literacy” refers not simply to the ability to read, but also the implied participation in discourses,

practices, and thought that revolve around reading and writing. In its conventional definition, “literacy” refers only to the ability to understand the written word. I will be talking about a greater scope of related reading-related activities and will be using “literacy” in lieu of a better existing word. Perhaps greater critical study of genres like the sentimental domestic, which link reading/authorship/literature with the self, will give rise to a better term.

In order to show the diversity of responses to these debates expressed by different sentimental writers, I will be examining three works, each of which engages in these debates in unique ways. It is important to note the diversity in sentimental novels’ engagement with these debates for two reasons. First, the sentimental novel as a genre is too often seen as monolithic, representing only one moral viewpoint, plot structure, or typical character; by noting the diversity of voices in the novels, I hope to show the rich variety which contributes to the value of this genre. Second, it is important to show that each sentimental novel presents a unique and nuanced position on this debate (and sometimes several intersecting opinions)—I will show that their contributions to the debate are more valuable than a single, didactic voice of moralism, as they have often been perceived. The first work, Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* is often considered the epitome of antebellum sentimental writing, and was one of the first American bestselling novels. Consideration of this novel is key to developing an understanding not only of the sentimental form but also of the norms of moral discourse in this genre which connect them to ongoing debates about the role of fiction. Next, I will examine how Fanny Fern’s semi-autobiographical novel *Ruth Hall* uses the sentimental form to interrogate the interiority of a woman

author, whose relationship to readers, morality, and authorship all reveal her nuanced positions toward contemporary discourses and the gendered conceptions of these activities. Finally, I will study how *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs reconstitutes ideas of literacy and voice from the liminal perspective of a slave woman. Jacobs' appropriation of sentimental rhetoric to criticize racialized norms of literacy and morality are key to understanding both the diversity of the sentimental genre and the far-reaching implications of contemporary debates over fiction. Unpacking this diversity is crucial to understanding that the sentimental genre is by no means monolithic or didactic, and thus understanding the participation of these works in the debates over novels. *The Wide, Wide World* represents the standard, *Ruth Hall* represents one of many monolith-breaking variations, and *Incidents* stands in for many works which re-appropriated the genre to new ends.

Each of these works is written by and about women, as was most common in the sentimental genre. Even so, it is important not to reduce these works to "women's literature" or to purport that they stand for women's morality as a single homogeneous group of concepts. This type of reductivism is exactly the type of excuse that has long been used to devalue sentimental fiction. However, it is impossible (and undesirable) to separate these works from the gendered experiences and voices of their female authors. The way that each author confronts fiction, morality, and the debate about their intersection is necessarily influenced by her experiences as a woman. Further, these books typically appealed to a specific reading community dominated by women. In certain ways, these books are missives from women writers to their audience of women, using fictional women's lives (or in some

cases their own) as the medium of communication, which are an especially effective mode for exploring the norms of behavior and feeling that are considered endangered by critics of fiction. Thus, I will examine the intersections of morality and literacy in many cases as the authors do: through a lens of women's experiences and intellectual life.

Chapter 1, *The Wide, Wide World*

Sympathy for the Devil:

Morality, Fiction, and Imagined Transgression

Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* was one of the first American bestsellers, eclipsed only in popularity by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* among American novels before the Civil War. In spite of this fact, it is rarely taught in survey courses. Although a few articles about it are published every year, its status as one of the most popular novels of the 19th century has been eclipsed by the modern ascendancy of writers like Thoreau and Hawthorne. Nina Baym describes it as one of the formative novels of the American literary tradition (*Women's Fiction* 20), and yet its very status as a sentimental novel has made it subject to historic disparagement and modern academic apathy.

The novel is frequently seen as the epitome of the sentimental novel, featuring a young, upper-middle class, white girl who learns to make her way in the world through faith, kindness, industry, and humility. The plot structure of the novel begins with Ellen's unexpected separation from her mother, a series of encounters with adults who are either enemies or mentors, a close attachment to a particularly pious young woman, and the young girl's efforts toward faith and good manners as she struggles with her dependence on a series of different adults and families. In the end of the book, Ellen is perfectly calm, pious, and intelligent, and is able to exhibit wise judgment and self-control. To seal the arc of a young sentimental heroine, she is married in a final unpublished chapter to a young man whom she has long been close

to and who helped shape her moral sensibilities. Although the story begins with the protagonist's launch into uncertainty and charts her moral/emotional struggle, most tension and conflict is quelled by the neat ending. The "happy ending" is especially important in showing readers that growth and experience are not windows to a chaotic and uncertain life, but instead ways for the young woman to develop her sense of self and choose her own path. Because of its putatively formulaic structure and conservative religious values, *The Wide, Wide World* is often seen as a particular bastion of normative 19th century femininity. This traditional structure particularly lends itself to the interrogation of social rules and mores—including the moral nature of fiction—precisely because it separates the young woman from her traditional guide (the mother) and forces her to experience, and choose between, a variety of moral/behavioral systems.

Indeed, the emotional, moral, and intellectual development of Warner's young main character depends upon her interaction with the written word, including morally-suspect fiction. Warner shapes and defines Ellen's arc in terms of her literacy. Ellen's standards of behavior and feeling are shaped by engaging with moral texts and people in reading communities that model and sympathetically evoke moral behavior. Warner couches Ellen's growth in terms of her position as a reader and frequently deals with her interiority through the act of writing—her loyalty to her friends, her control of her temper, and her dutiful behavior are all shaped by her reading (the Bible, biographies) and her reading communities, which are especially formed by her "surrogate siblings" John and Alice. Letters shape Ellen's trajectory of dependence from her parents to a series of guardians, literally controlling her life

through words. Ellen's own letters become a way for her to evaluate her own process of maturation while receiving guidance and feedback from mentors. From the very beginning of the novel, Bible reading is depicted as a particular comfort and guide to the uncertain young girl, and history reading shapes her patriotic consciousness. Further complicating this focus on literacy is Warner's own ambivalent treatment of Ellen's encounters with fiction. The way Warner both criticizes and utilizes fiction highlights the fraught position of fiction in America at this time, as well as highlighting Warner's consciousness of her place in the debate. While Warner evokes many traditional values of temperance and piety, her allowance for both Ellen's intellectual independence and her ambivalence toward fiction reading, combined with her status as a writer of fiction, place her in a complex position with regards to those debates.

However, *The Wide, Wide World* does far more than parrot Victorian American social mores in fictional format and with an emphasis on fiction. Warner's varied and rich contributions to the debate over morality and literacy are made particularly obvious in Chapter 45. This chapter seems almost incidental to the plot, but is in fact a crucial insight into Warner's treatment of fiction. Warner's very treatment of literacy as a routine activity centers its importance in Ellen's moral-emotional development. In this chapter, Ellen and her surrogate brother (and mentor) John have a series of three conversations about Ellen's participation in literacy. First, Ellen tries to read John's sermon in shorthand, but cannot. When her literacy is denied, she is at the mercy of John's scolding. Then, Ellen has her first encounter in the book with fiction, which leads her momentarily astray only to be corrected by

John. This stated aversion to fiction is ironic from the mouth of a fictional character, initially revealing Warner's ambivalence toward some of the contemporary debates over fiction. Finally, Ellen and John participate in a literate activity together which puts as much emphasis on pleasure as on moral edification, which further complicates Warner's ambivalent stance toward the responsibilities and uses of literacy. After exploring each of these scenes of literacy in Chapter 45 for the ways that Warner participates in the debates at hand, I will then examine how Ellen's behavior as a reader and her participation in reading communities outside of the actual texts she reads are crucial to understanding Warner's multi-layered position on fiction. Ellen's interiority as shaped by reading, her physical manner of engaging with reading, and the ways she navigates the various communities of readers in her life, all reveal Warner's nuanced positions on, and ambivalence toward, the reading of fiction.

These issues are addressed most explicitly in this chapter, when Ellen is spending a holiday in another town with friends of John and Alice. In the beginning of the chapter, Ellen approaches her foster-brother John with unusual timidity with a request to read his sermons: "She coloured and hesitated... 'Well,' said Ellen, 'I wished very much—I was going to ask—if you would have any objection to let me read one of your sermons.'" (Warner 432). John replies by handing her a page of shorthand, which she cannot read. Her attempt to take religious learning into her own hands in this interaction is thwarted by an inscrutable professional language in which she is not literate, and the conversation turns instead to John's verbal instruction on her religious behavior. In this scene, Ellen is particularly thwarted by an inability to

access a masculine world of literacy. She serves instead as an example of pious humility in the face of a teacher, and tearfully accepts a lecture on proper piety.

This is exactly the type of didactic scene for which the sentimental novel is notorious. However, this scene is far more complicated than a simple reinforcement of Protestant American norms about prayer and daily devotion. It is a statement-by-example on the contemporary debate about the moral function of American fiction. Warner's novel takes the side of the moral exemplar novel by using its narration to communicate Christian values. Indeed, the most common solution among sentimental authors was to model morality through the ethical development of their heroines. Warner's chapter certainly falls into this category, especially in this first scene, which is a lecture-by-proxy to the audience, because of the way that sympathy inherently requires the emotional participation of the reader. When Ellen is silenced and then brought to tears by John's reprimands, she evokes the pitying and empathizing response of the reader who is targeted by sentimental rhetoric (Halpern) to identify with Ellen's lesson. However, it is ironic that it is through a denial of literacy that this moral lesson is inculcated—Ellen can't read the sermon, and this in turn leads to her rebuke. In this scene, Warner seems to be equating literacy with piety, for Ellen's alienation from the sermon is a proxy for, and reveals, her alienation from God through her neglected prayers.

In fact, the source of morality and its ties to literacy—exactly what is most debated in contemporary periodicals—is further unpacked by the rest of the chapter. In the very next scene, Warner exposes the paradox between critics of fiction and the moralizing responsibility of the author by revealing the varied influential potential of

works of fiction. She reveals the contradictory nature of her position as a writer of fiction with a moral responsibility by having one of the moral authorities of her book criticize fiction. The same figure who encourages her productive literacy scolds her pleasure-reading and the primary moral character of the novelist casts aspersions on fiction. In the next scene of Chapter 45, Ellen is reading in the parlor when John reminds her that it is time for her to go out. After promising him to stop reading, she loses track of time and postpones their arrangement to go out. In response, John takes the book from her hands and chastises her for her lack of self-control. It is then revealed what kind of reading distracted her from her duties and dissolved her self-control: ““It was an old magazine—*Blackwood's Magazine*,” Ellen confesses (Warner 440). *Blackwood's* was a popular magazine of the 19th century, which was known for publishing horror and romance stories, including serialized novels. When John charges her to never read *Blackwood's* again, Ellen is regretful but obedient. In this scene, the dangers of fiction are hinted at if not expressed explicitly. The fiction causes Ellen to lose her self-control and neglect her other, more scholarly and moral reading. In Warner's world where industriousness and self-regulation are important, Ellen's transgression stands out. Although this scene more directly brings into contention the manner rather than the content of the reading, the implication (which was so commonly drawn by contemporary critics) is that fiction takes an unhealthily strong hold on the mind and desires of the reader. When John forbids her from reading it anymore, his voice echoes the criticisms of those writers cited in the introduction who see fiction as a waste of time and a dangerous influence particularly on the minds of young women. The values of the Protestant work ethic and the

innocence of young ladies' minds—both of which Warner supports through the sympathetic portrayal of the hard-working, innocent Alice—are both endangered by the reading of fiction

Indeed, John echoes these criticisms once again when he gives Ellen parting advice in Scotland. He says simply, “Read no novels” (519). This advice is delivered alongside other exhortations to pray regularly and remain in correspondence with him so that he can guide her. All of this moral advice is received gratefully by Ellen. In this case, as in others where he has urged Ellen to read her Bible, John is complicating the good/bad dichotomy of judgments about women's literacy; he is encouraging her self-improvement through literacy while acknowledging the danger of specific forms of literacy (novels). In these scenes, John takes on the voices of Warner's contemporary critics who viewed fiction as dangerous to the American moral compass, particularly to the innocence and good sense of young women, who, as shown in the excerpt from the *Ladies Repository*, were considered especially susceptible to its charms. It is ironic, obviously, for a character in a novel to criticize the reading of novels, and Warner does little to resolve the dissonance between her form and her moral mouthpiece, instead leaving the reader pondering her ambivalent orientation toward literacy that both takes advantage of and shies away from the potential of fiction. Warner seems to present a didactic scene, but by writing it into her novel, necessarily complicates that didacticism—she says through her writing that novel reading is dangerous, but that particular novels like *hers* are beneficial, and this doubled communication cannot have been lost on her community of readers.

Especially in the magazine scene, Warner complicates the ties between literacy and morality by critiquing fiction through her own fictional work. Warner wrote a novel in which novels, and fiction reading in general, are criticized. This self-conscious engagement with morality and literacy debates of her period acknowledges the ongoing debate about the function(s) of literature in America. By taking the conventional sentimental route of using fiction to model normative moral behavior, the novel participates in the ongoing moral debate over fiction. It would seem that through John's invocations of moral authority—as a clergy member and as an adult role model—Warner implicitly takes a moral stance against fiction. However, the very fact that John is himself a character in a novel reveals Warner's ambivalence on the subject. Not only does John seemingly contradict Warner (and in some instances himself) regarding the danger/potential of fiction, but his status as a moral authority is also challenged throughout the novel by other influences—from Aunt Fortune to Alice—who offer slightly different moral codes which Ellen must negotiate. By both criticizing and using fiction, Warner makes an explicit statement against particular types of fiction (horror, romance novels) while maintaining the implicit premise of her fiction's capacity for moral good. She captures the nuance between types of fiction which many anti-fiction critics ignored, while also betraying further ambivalence toward fiction in the inscrutable character of John. This type of nuanced message is inherent in the sentimental novel, which at once constructs communities based around normative standards of moral behavior and makes space for both characters and readers who push at these standards through their emotional and intellectual

engagements with others, just like Warner's readers who admire the perfect heroine of a (potentially dangerous) novel.

This ambivalence on Warner's part toward the moral responsibility—and potential—of literature is finally revealed at the end of Chapter 45. After John and Ellen finally do get out on their walk, they have a conversation about the association each holds with different flowers. When discussing a Daphne flower, John notes that it reminds him of lines from a Cowper poem. Up until this statement, the associations with the flower have been purely religious, while in this association that John constructs is both religious and aesthetic. Although it is poetry rather than fiction that John cites, it is included for its pleasurable potential and aesthetic quality. In response to these lines, indeed, "Ellie [Ellen] was silent a moment from pleasure" (443). This scene focuses on the pleasure that Ellen gets from flowers, from poetry, and from the touch of her companion John. Each of these sites of pleasure deviate from the staid Protestant morality represented by John and voiced by the critics of fiction, and yet are legitimized by Warner because of the encouragement of John, the novel's moral mouthpiece. This consideration of poetry as pleasure shows the potential for literature to serve as a source of non-religious enjoyment in a way that still supports the moral development of American youth. Here, John's admittance of pleasurable literacy undermines his previous staid approaches to reading and shows him as having the potential ambivalence which Warner herself exhibits. Warner's contributions to the morality/fiction debate are not only nuanced, but sometimes ambivalent in a way that belies the stereotype of didacticism and monolithic moral norms in sentimental literature. Further, the way that the poetry forms a bond between John and Ellen

implicates the connective potential of literature that goes beyond the moral/corrupting binary often constructed by contemporary literary critics.

In many ways, this chapter allows Warner to approach debates about literacy and morality without taking as implacable a stance as the periodical writers. Warner writes a novel that serves as a moral guide, but also allows her most moral character to discourage the reading of fiction. Warner's characters place a premium on "useful" reading of religious and historical value, and yet they also enjoy a moonlit walk with poetry and flowers—a scene which tantalizingly evokes the type of torrid romantic fiction that most startled anti-fiction moralizers. *The Wide, Wide World* does not constitute a single argument on the role of fiction and literacy in America, but instead represents a spectrum of viewpoints. Through this ambivalence, Warner is able to reveal the diversity of the possible moral influences of fiction, while acknowledging the pleasurable and/or moral potential of the genre. She transcends the moral/immoral binary of traditional judgments about novels and fiction, instead allowing for nuanced considerations of aspects of a work like its usefulness, potential influence, and the nature of its audience to contribute to her value judgments.

Outside of Chapter 45 and throughout the book, Ellen's literacy is portrayed as key to her character. Her reading—of the Bible, of American history, and of biographies—shapes her emotional-psychological development. Indeed, the loyalty to her home country that bothers her uncle is inculcated through her reading about George Washington, and her engagement with the Bible is shown to be a great source of emotional sustenance during her times of stress. Elizabeth Trubey argues, in fact, that Ellen's reading habits gave her access to independent and rebellious ideas that

lent her “sparks of intellectual resistance” throughout out the story. Even more so, however, her reading allows her to participate in greater reading communities. The ultimate moral ideal in the novel is embodied by the character of Alice, Ellen’s surrogate mother/sister who provides the most personal moral instruction to young Ellen, and whose death at a young age necessitates Ellen’s attainment of moral and emotional maturity. Ellen and Alice spend most of their time reading together, or discussing what they have read. As Alice’s health declines, Ellen assumes the leadership role in their two-person reading community and reads to Alice on her deathbed. In this way, Ellen’s literate activities shape her relationships and her maturity. The narrative lesson of moral literacy is primarily shaped by Alice’s illness and death, in which Warner deploys sentimental tropes of tragedy. Tellingly, most of this reading is nonfiction. In this way, Warner constructs a morally exemplar novel that privileges “useful” reading. She learns didactic lessons from her Bible and biography, and she develops her relationships and modulates her interiority through letter writing.

When Ellen does read fiction—mostly before she is chastised for it—the novels or magazines remove her from this reading community, as shown in the magazine scene where *Blackwood’s* takes Ellen’s mind away from John and his instructions. Although it is not itself a novel, the way that John’s critiques of it mirror the critiques of novels aired in the introductions suggest that Warner is using *Blackwood’s* as a proxy for fiction in general. However, it also constitutes a moment of intellectual privacy for Ellen, which alienates John. In this scene, Ellen is reading silently to herself, as she does frequently throughout *The Wide, Wide World*. Clearly,

the thoughts she engages with preoccupy her mind and make her forget her duties. As she says, “I meant to stop, but I forgot, and I should have gone on I don’t know how long if you had not stopped me. I very often do so.” (439). This type of private intellectual activity tied to literacy was also part of the debates raging at the time over the appropriate role of fiction. Critics of fiction, as mentioned in the introduction, were as much concerned with the activities of readers and their reading communities as they were with the actual content of books. Through examining how Ellen’s interiority is shaped and expressed by her literate activities, as well as exploring her participation in differing reading communities, it becomes apparent that Warner’s participation in the debates over the role of literature extends, just like the criticism, beyond the page to the reader.

The ties between women’s participation in literate activities and their interiority (their private thoughts, opinions, and worldviews) were a key part of the debate over the role of literature. On the one hand, many critics asserted that the type of reading and fantasizing associated with fiction was not only a waste of time, but also dangerous to the moral compasses of young ladies. One reviewer from the *American Review* wrote that a particular novel “excites those evil impulses, which slumber in the hearts of the purest [women] like the hidden embers within the volcano” and that reading these scenes will cause the “virtuous woman” to feel “the blush of shame and indignation mantel on her cheeks” (*Novels* 59). In this review and many more like it, critics are invoking the role of sympathy as a link between reader and text as a site of danger for pure young women. Through engaging the private emotions and thoughts—that is, the interiority—of the young woman, the fiction

agitates immoral feelings that manifest both inside (“evil impulses”) and on the outside (the “blush of shame” which implies both embarrassment and arousal). Here, sympathy (the emotional tie between reader and text) is the very danger of fiction, and the private communion of woman with fiction is the site of risk. Warner certainly invokes this when fiction reading causes even the pious, obedient little Ellen to neglect her duties and her moral guide.

However, there is an implied distinction between the type of damaging sympathy of the dangerous fiction, and the type of sympathy invoked by pious or didactic fiction that ties the reader to her idealized heroine. Warner frequently invokes this sympathy through both Ellen and Alice, each of whom fulfills particular sympathetic tropes. The orphaned child, the sickly young saint, and the surrogate mother are all key tropes to both didactic and sentimental fiction which both use sympathy to evoke the appropriate response—pious repentance, pity for the suffering, admiration of the virtuous. *The Wide, Wide World* deploys these tropes to evoke such feeling regularly throughout the plot, such as when John chides Ellen for not praying regularly. In this way, Warner further explores her own ambivalence toward fiction by illustrating the dangers of sympathy but also employing it for her own, more virtuous purposes. Rather than crafting a single argument or giving a didactic answer to the question of fiction, Warner enters these debates in multifaceted ways that allow for her own nuanced positions.

Warner externalizes issues of private emotional response and sympathy onto the public stage by depicting how Ellen and other characters (particularly women) constitute and engage in reading communities. I define reading communities as

groups of individuals that participate in literate activities together, including reading, letter writing, and discussion. Both Ellen and the actual reader of *The Wide, Wide World* participate in reading communities. The novel's success meant that it had hundreds of thousands of readers all in the same few years, predominantly women, who read and discussed the book among themselves. At the same time, Ellen and Alice model a reading community built around "useful" and virtuous literature. They often read psalms together in ways that explicitly evoke the mother-child relationship (chapter 23), and when Alice is ill, Ellen reads to her for comfort. Literate activity is in fact a key facet constituting their relationship, and it serves to bring their interiority (as involved with reading) into the expressed, semi-public sphere of the parlor. In these scenes, Warner imagines literate activities as connecting a community of women—tellingly, John and Ellen rarely read together or aloud, instead he prescribes her reading from afar. This aspect of Warner's treatment of literacy is key because it imagines a role for literate activities for women that is rarely touched on by contemporary reviewers. In this novel, reading together binds women in friendship while allowing them space to make intellectual explorations.

Although in Warner's novel in particular the reading tends not to be of fiction, her contemporary sentimental writers from Fanny Fern to E. D. E. N. Southworth depict similar women's reading communities shaped around fiction. This depiction is an important element of why the contributions of sentimental novels are crucial to the contemporary debates over fiction and its value. Few if any reviewers discuss women's reading communities as a consequence (negative or positive) of fiction or literacy, in large part because the predominantly male reviewers would have had no

access to such communities. The sentimental novel, however, constitutes a part of these reading communities by being produced by, read by, and centered on women, and indeed because they tenderly depict such reading communities. Alice and Ellen's reading community constitutes Ellen's greatest source of emotional growth, while the connection Ellen shows to her grandmother through their learning community is a key sign of Ellen's maturity and capacity for compassion. *The Wide Wide World*, then, contributes not only another voice to the debates over the place of fiction, but also injects women's experiences (of reading communities) into an otherwise male-dominated debate. By showing women reading the right kinds of books in the right way together, Warner also encourages intellectual and literate relationships among her own women readers, empowering their friendships and intellectual pursuits while also throwing down her gauntlet for the value of literacy to women's private development and public selves. By Warner's example, fiction can serve an important connective role among women that bolsters whatever moral edification (or corruption) it may provide. Together, women's reading communities experience sympathetic connections both to the texts and to each other, reinforcing and co-negotiating the moral norms found in the literature that they share.

Through my examination of *The Wide, Wide World*, I believe it becomes apparent that the novel's treatment of Ellen's interiority and moral development reflects the debates about fiction and morality—both through the text and through the audience—that contemporary literary critics and the sentimental novel itself were preoccupied by. *The Wide, Wide World* is key to the study of these debates because, while it typifies the form of the sentimental novel, its statements on literacy are

anything but typical; they are ambivalent, complex, and sometimes progressively feminist. Understanding not only how the sentimental novel has contributed to these debates but also appreciating the diversity of these voices will greatly enrich the scholarly understanding of antebellum literary theory.

In some ways, Warner's contributions to cultural understandings of fiction relate to Jane Tompkins' conception of "cultural work." For Tompkins, sentimental novels' main cultural work comes from constructing norms of womanhood, piety, and Americanness that were important to the cultural life of women in particular. She especially sees them as helpful artifacts in understanding the cultural realities of the period. By this definition, Warner's contributions to the debate are a part of that cultural work in that they contribute to cultural conceptions of the role of literacy. However, a careful consideration of Warner's participation reveals that she doesn't simply provide vehicles for that work, but rather actively participates in these debates by elaborating on the function and nature of literature, particularly fiction. As a part of the development of antebellum theories about literature, Warner's sentimental novel is important to modern scholarship. Rather than simply reinforcing traditional ideals, Warner gives space to ambivalence, resistance, and growth pertaining to literate activities, lending a subtle and sophisticated voice to the antebellum conceptions of novels.

Another key voice from sentimental novelists at this time was Fanny Fern. Fern's work shifts the focus from women readers to a woman author, even more explicitly exploring the relationships among fiction, morality, and gender. Fanny Fern's immensely popular columns and novels push at the boundaries of Warner's

moral ideals and give even more space to subversive literary practices. Her novel *Ruth Hall*, which I will consider in the following chapter, upends the patriarchal control of family wealth through her representation of the independent single mother who makes a living by her pen. Further, her satire of the masculine literary world unpacks the gendering of literate activities, and her semi-autobiographical style further challenges the normative standards of female literacy and moral/proper behavior that contemporary critics were so worried about. While Warner presents the most memorable figure of normative young womanhood, she also betrays her ambivalence toward fiction, contributing a more multivalent voice to the contemporary outcry over the morality/immorality of fiction in general and novels in particular. Fern, however, outright contradicts some of the aforementioned critics of fiction, while also mounting a sometimes passionate, sometimes tender defense of the reading community. Especially through her use of letters and through her confrontations with the contemporary printing industry, Fern inserts her unique and indomitable voice into the literary debate over fiction, authorship, and morality.

Chapter 2, *Ruth Hall*

“Written for bread and butter, not fame”:

Defiant Literacy for the Female Moral Leader

While *The Wide, Wide World* was typical of the sentimental genre, it by no means represents an immutable formula for the sentimental novel. In fact, many writers adopted the form, conventions, and sympathetic rhetoric of the sentimental novel to tell stories of more diverse life experiences than that of the typical Ellen-type sentimental heroine. Although the archetype represented by *The Wide, Wide World* itself represents an important type of feminine interiority, scholars often rely on the preponderance of Ellen-type heroines in formulating generalizations about sentimental novels. However, this is a disservice to the variety of subjectivities, life experiences, and expressions of interiority that the genre enables. One of these authors was Fanny Fern (born Sara Willis), whose columns and short stories had already made her a popular literary star by the time she published her semi-autobiographical first novel, *Ruth Hall*. Fern’s playful, frank prose and incisive wit made her the highest-paid columnist of her time, and the same popularity was also accorded to *Ruth Hall*. The novel uses many tools of the sentimental genre—the abandoned woman, the reliance on god, the cruelty/kindness of strangers, and the ascent to respectability; sympathy, emotion, and communities of women. However, *Ruth Hall* is no “pale and pious heroine” (Douglass 3) like those criticized by Ann Douglass: Fern’s leading lady is feisty, opinionated, and makes an independent living

through writing by the end of the novel. She criticizes religious figures, social norms, and traditional men, using the sentimental mode as a delivery device for her progressive and controversial views.

Most interestingly, however, Ruth's literate activities and her participation in reading communities present a different vision from Warner's of the role of fiction in antebellum society, just as Fern herself acted as an agent for literary change in her own right. Ruth Hall, like Fern, is a successful writer whose writing supports her freedom from oppressive family members, allows her to reject men's support, and empowers her to raise her daughters according to her own ideals. Fern was an extremely popular writer of her period who wrote about authorship, and in her later life became one of the leading voices about (and in vociferous support of) women's authorial voices. *Ruth Hall* is in part different from *The Wide, Wide World* because Fern's take on literacy sets her apart from other, more traditional sentimental writers like Warner. It follows not only the intellectual but also the financial growth of a female author, whose literacy and reading communities are more central to the story and more explicitly addressed. Fern takes slightly different positions than Warner on the central issues of morality, fiction, and authorship, and in this way *Ruth Hall* is important to study not only for its unique heroine but also as an example of the diversity of ways sentimental authors engaged in the fiction/morality debate and the variety of positions that they took. It belies the myth of the sentimental genre as a monolith of moral didacticism. Indeed, by literalizing the issues of morality, fiction, and indeed gender, *Ruth Hall* contributes to the contemporary literary debates in ways that both add to, and are distinct from, the contributions of Warner.

This literalization takes a new view on the relationship of women to literacy by profiling the woman author, and takes a different, someone more jaded approach to the morality and piety embodied by Ellen. Ruth is well-mannered, but outspoken. She is a good mother, but does not submit to the wills of other family members. She depends emotionally on her faith, but seeks solutions to her problems in the public sphere, not in the Bible. Ruth grows not only in morality but also grows economically and in her writing from oppression to strength. Ruth's (and Fern's) constructed relationship between literacy and morality differs from Warner's so the book's contributions to the fiction/morality debate are meaningfully distinct and valuable. Both Warner and Fern construct stories about the moral/intellectual development of women, but because of the divergent ages and life experiences of their main characters, each author ends up with a different formulation of the morality/literacy relationship. While Warner is conventional in her story but somewhat more daring in her ambivalence toward fiction, both Fern's story and her construction of literacy as empowering (morally and financially) are even more daring.

Ruth's emotional expression (and moral convictions) are amplified and legitimized through writing columns and writing letters. This is an even more explicit way of dealing with the morality/literature debate, which Fern confronts unapologetically, but at some times ambivalently—like Warner. That is, Ruth takes her moral/literary development into her own hands, thus making more explicit the terms and the stakes of the morality/literature debate. At the same time, Ruth is liberated from poverty by her writing and empowered to lead a moral reading community by her literacy; on the other hand, she tells her daughter that “no happy

woman writes” and bemoans the state of the literary marketplace, implying the moral and financial dangers of the literate world. Fern’s voice (through Ruth) on contemporary literacy is able to confront more than what Warner could easily reckon with. While Warner focused on the moral implications of reading fiction, Fern both writes from the position of a woman author and represents the subjectivity of one. While Warner’s Ellen is mainly a reader, Fern’s Ruth is not only a writer but an author in the public sphere (like Fern herself). Through deploying Ruth’s experiences with writing and authorship as well as her participation in reading communities, Fern addresses different aspects of the morality/fiction debate. Ruth rebuts the charge that writing degrades the moral duty of motherhood, she challenges the critics who resent her transgression into the public literary sphere, and she shows how literate activity can co-construct a morally-centered reading community. Fern is able to address the morality of “authoresses” in her depiction of Ruth’s relationship with her daughters, she interrogates the role of women’s literary voices in the public sphere through Ruth’s interactions with fans and with her publishers, and she investigates the construction of reading communities (particularly the development of moral sentiments within these communities) which consist of both men and women through Ruth’s exchanges of letters with fans.

Ruth’s use of letters constitutes a fascinating and detailed look into the world of sentimental reading communities, in which women’s subjectivities, moral sensibilities, and expressions of interiority were often negotiated. These letters were crucial at the time in creating and maintaining reading communities: most periodicals that published fiction and criticism also published letters to the editor by fans and

readers, and the circulation through post and copying into journals of popular columns was especially popular among young women at the time. In answering letters, as well, Ruth dwells on her relationships with the publishing industry, as well as dealing explicitly with the relationship between her interiority and her writing. In this way, Fern uses the literate activity of letter writing—and through epistolary sections of her fiction—to further interrogate the relationships among literacy, morality, and authorship. Indeed, through letters, Fern is able to expand the scope of the reading community modeled in *The Wide, Wide World* to include a more diverse group of both women and men who shape their ideas and identities around Ruth's writing.

In Chapter 65, these issues are worked out with a sharpness and nuance that belies the section's brevity. The chapter takes place in a crucial part of the plot, when things are just starting to look up for Ruth, who writes under the pen name Floy, much like Fern. Indeed, the use of her pen-name becomes an issue for Ruth when she is trying to hide her identity not only from her audience but from her abusive family. As I will address later in this chapter, Ruth's fraught relationships with publishers, her family, and her own identity as an author are visible in the way she navigates the use of a pen name and the economic consequences of her authorship, and Fern's treatment of these issues reveals her own complex relationship to the position of authorship. In chapter 65, Ruth has begun to make a subsistence wage from her writing, and is beginning to receive public acclaim and letters of acclamation. Through some reflection on her writing process, literary goals, and interactions with fans, Ruth Hall begins in this chapter to truly see herself as an author. For the first

time, the readers are able to see her reckoning with the social and moral consequences of her writing, dealing with the conflicts between literacy and motherhood, resisting the falsely-moralizing male critics, and leading a stalwart moral community through her writings. Through Ruth's process of self-identification, Fern articulates nuanced positions on the roles that literacy, morality, and community intersect in the public sphere for women writers.

Chapter 65 falls in the second half of the novel, when Ruth is beginning to rise above her previous privations and is able to provide for her daughter without entire dependence upon her family (who denounce her "scribbling" in jealousy of her success). At the beginning of this chapter, Ruth experiences one of the classic problems of single motherhood, which is a tension between her work and her motherly duties. Ruth scolds her daughter for interrupting her work: "Wait just a moment, Nettie, till mamma finishes this page," said Ruth, dipping her pen again in the old stone inkstand...then little Nettie drew such a heavy sigh" (Fern 257). In this scene, Nettie and Ruth are displaying exactly some of the behavior that most frightened opponents of women's literacy, and especially their writing. One famous English commentator on the subject of women authors remarked that the experience inherent to authorship would impose a "de-feminizing" process on women, in which they would absorb too much of the world around them and be too burdened by earthly cares (qtd. in Coltrap-McQuin 17). In a period in which the "cult of domesticity" promoted mothering as the ultimate moral duty, this threat of encroachment was decried as threatening to the very moral fiber of the nation. The picture of the neglectful working mother—revitalized throughout recent history as a weapon against

suffragettes, women's lib, and second-wave feminism— was a meaningful totem for those who argued against women authors and the morality of fiction reading and/or writing.

However, in the very next moment after approaching this place of potential criticism, Fern upends expectations. Ruth drops her pen to act as an attentive mother once more, and in fact employs words, fiction, and imagination to soothe her child to sleep: “taking her in [Nettie] arms and kissing her, told her about, ‘Mistress McShuttle, / Who lived in a coal-scuttle’...then little Nettie’s snowy lids drooped over her violet eyes, and she was far away in the land of dreams” (Fern 258). By bringing about the moment of danger—the de-feminized authoress who neglects motherhood—and then resolving it through further literary activity, Fern steps into the debate over the morality of fiction. Indeed, the charming romanticization of Mistress McShuttle’s poverty normalizes and soothes Nettie’s suffering because of Ruth’s oppressed situation—Ruth’s attentiveness to her one-person audience shows her authorship at work alongside her mothering. In this episode, Fern’s morality is constructed relationally as a duty to her daughter. Although the burden of working (through writing) does threaten to interfere with her moral obligation to serve as a mother, the tender moment between Ruth and Nettie reinforces the fact that Ruth’s literacy serves the greater moral codes of her relational obligations, and thus Fern puts forth a nuanced case for the morality of Ruth’s fiction and the fiction-writer herself.

The following scene shifts the attention from Ruth’s private role as a mother to the consequences of her public role as an author, and shows how she resists the

hypocritical moral outrage of the male critics who resent her public voice. One letter writer, called John Stokes, encourages her to gather her writings together into a book, and attests that he and his neighbors would all like to buy it. Ruth is taken by the idea, and indeed remarks that she is surprised by the acclaim because “those articles were written for bread and butter, not fame; and tossed to the printer before the ink was dry, or I had time for a second reading” (260). In this section, both Fern and Ruth are reckoning with the demands of the literary marketplace, where capitalist forces, morality, and art all intersect. Ruth, for example, sees her writing as primarily economically-directed. When she comforts Nettie and when she reflects on Stokes’ suggestion, her duty to Nettie as a mother and a provider is foremost in her mind. It is only through the epistolary interaction with her reading community that Ruth starts to see herself as an author. Instead of seeing herself merely as a subsistence wage earner, she begins to see herself as the fully-fledged type of author that Fern herself was—developing relationships with her audience, reflecting on the goals of her work, and developing a unique literary voice. Indeed, this emergent but conflicted sense of authorship had been foreshadowed in the previous chapters. In choosing a pen name, Ruth chooses to disassociate her private life from her public works of fiction and authorship. Indeed, this dissociation seems warranted by the logic of the story (and Ruth’s dependence on others) in the face of the criticism she receives from her family. In the preceding chapter, Ruth’s brother Hyacinth—an author and editor in his own right—asks a friend to influence Ruth “to desist from scribbling, and seek some other employment. What employment, he did not condescend to state; in fact, it was a matter of entire indifference to him, provided she did not cross his track” (256).

Hyacinth clearly views her potential authorship as a threat to his status, seeing her potential for “crossing” (transgressing) into his public sphere of writing as an affront to his artistic territory. Indeed, the criticism from a territorial male writer is almost a prophecy from Fern. Less than a year after *Ruth Hall* was published, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a letter to a friend lamenting the popular and commercial success of women sentimental writers, who he saw as degrading to serious American literature—and which were impressively outselling his own works:

America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash—and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed. What is the mystery of these innumerable editions of the 'Lamplighter,' and other books neither better nor worse?—worse they could not be, and better they need not be, when they sell by the 100,000. (qtd. in Idol and Ponder 21)

Through their objections, both Hyacinth and Hawthorne echo critics of the time in their jealous, exclusionary disdain for women writers in general and sentimental writers in particular. By writing *Ruth* as rising above these criticisms and succeeding in spite of them both as an author and as an upstanding mother, Fern disproves their claims to moral and artistic superiority. Indeed, through the ridiculous and avaricious character of Hyacinth, Fern paints men who denigrate women's identities as authors to be men who are themselves the party lacking in morality. *Ruth's* critical father is avaricious, her disdainful brother a bad writer working only for the inflation of his ego—these moral-high-ground critics invoke morality only for their own gain in pride or in greed. Fern not only defends the woman author and her fiction, but strikes back against the selfish, falsely-moral male critic. Hyacinth's use of authorship as a delivery device for fame, fortune, ego, and ease is lambasted

throughout the novel, and through him Fern paints male critics who belittle (or moralize against) women's fiction as simply marking their intellectual territory with disingenuous and patronizing claims to the moral high ground. In this way, Fern situates her positions on fiction/morality within the current discourse. She also goes further to respond with a sharp, critical boldness that departs from Warner's more subtle, ambivalent, and retiring style, which foregrounded readers rather than authors.

Indeed, Ruth not only ignores her critics' aspersions on her career, but as of chapter 65 begins to see herself not simply as a subsistence writer but also as an author with a goal and vision. In replying to Stokes' letter, Ruth muses that the forced speed at which she writes may indeed benefit her columns: "there is more freshness about them than there would have been, had I leisure to have pruned and polished them" (260). Ruth begins to think about her own artistic process and unique voice in these lines, and the idea of collating her work into a book does come to fruition by the end of the novel. Instead of ending the novel with a marriage, as is traditional in the stereotypical sentimental novel, Fern ends *Ruth Hall* by giving Ruth financial stability and literary fame. It seems that the development of a full-fledged identity as an author, not as a wife, is the arc of self-actualization for Ruth in this unconventional sentimental structure. It is through writing and literacy, not marriage, that Ruth comes to be a good mother, a respected agent in society, and a moral leader of (reading) community.

When Fern substitutes literacy for marriage, she asserts the potential morality of the role of author, who in Ruth's case serves as a supportive, morally-centered central figure for a co-created community of readers. She is moral in that she eagerly

fulfills her role as a mother, displays a tenacious Protestant work ethic, and encourages both practicality and piety in her readers. Indeed, it is the formation and constant co-negotiation of her reading community that truly establishes both Ruth's self-actualization as an author and Fern's implicit claims about the positive moral potential of fiction. This is especially clear in the letters Ruth receives. In one of these letters, a dying woman named Mary writes Ruth to say that "I am not mistaken in thinking that we both lean on the same Rock of Ages; both discern, through the mists and clouds of time, the Sun of Righteousness" (261). Mary wants Ruth to know that she feels that they are alike in feeling, and that although she "shall never see you, 'Floy,' on earth," she wants to send a letter in reply to Ruth's writing that will cement their bond as women alike in heart, a sentiment which both reveals and cements the writing community that forms around Ruth. Mary's focus is on the shared sense of Christian faith that she senses in Ruth, and in this way Ruth's place as an author serves as a position of moral leadership (260).

Stokes' letter also carries similar implications of the community: he writes, "I have a family of bouncing girls and boys; and when we've all done work, we get round the fire of an evening, while one of us reads your pieces aloud...and neighbor Smith, who comes in to hear 'em" (cite). In this anecdote, Ruth serves as the center of a reading community that encourages not only literacy but the strengthening of connections among family members and neighbors. Far from threatening the integrity of traditional family values and structures, as warned by alarmist critics, Ruth's fictions bind together a community of men as well as women who connect to her piety and strengthen their own traditional bonds of community. Indeed, the inclusion

of men like John Stokes in her reading community validates Ruth's public role as a writer—not only within the private women's sphere but in the public, multi-gendered sphere of literacy, Ruth is able to lead morally and boldly her own reading community.

Through this analysis, it becomes clear that Fanny Fern's work has less of an overt or didactic emphasis on morality than Warner's does. Ruth Hall's positive moral qualities consist of being a good mother, displaying the Protestant work ethic in her writing activities, and leading a reading community that emphasizes piety and the strengthening of traditional communal bonds. In her indirect moral commentary through representation, Fern uses her narration to comment more on class and on religious hypocrisy than she does to forward ladylike or submissive behavior. She lambasts Ruth's father-in-law and brother as hypocritical, avaricious false Christians. Her father in particular often quotes scripture as a justification for his avaricious choices, and he simultaneously eggs Ruth on to employ her Protestant work ethic to support herself while finding her chosen employment, writing, unladylike and too public. This portrayal strikes back at those who criticize the sentimental novel on moral grounds, so that Fern not only defends fiction but rebuts its critics by attacking their characters. Her criticisms indeed take on a proto-feminist tone in how they emphasize the unfairness and absurdity of the men's assumptions of superiority—the final third of the book, indeed, seems to be dedicated to proving how superior Ruth is to the men who tried to hold her back through Fern's wry narration while allowing Ruth herself to remain polite and humble. Fern's nuanced treatment of the types of morality encouraged by literacy, and her own semi-subversive moral judgments

delivered through her fiction, reveal that the moral tendencies of sentimental novels are more complex than modern critics typically give them credit for—Warner endorses submission, Fern boldness, Warner relies on masculine Christian guidance, Fern ridicules similar men, Warner sees some reading as itself a dangerous activity, while Fern sees women's authorship as a pathway to greater mortality for whole communities. While both advance the potential virtue of literacy and give varying space to their protagonists' intellectual resistance, the lack of ethical conformity between just these two authors belies the bland and monolithic image of the didactic sentimental novel forwarded by many modern critics. Additionally, *Ruth Hall* goes further than *The Wide, Wide World* into the morality/literacy debates because it does not only concern women as readers and in a reading community, but also unpacks the expression of women's interiority through public authorship, as well as the moral and social anxieties which accompany such a sojourn into the moral sphere.

In *Ruth Hall*, Fanny Fern uses the sentimental mode to connect readers to the struggle of a widow and author whose struggle to support her family was pitiable but whose character was admirable. Although she is certainly less overtly emotional or pitiful than Ellen, Ruth's struggles (especially when glossed with calls to emotion by Fern's narration) are still emotionally evocative to the reader. Indeed, the ways that Fern connects her readers to Ruth's reading community is a particularly deft use of the connection of sympathy, because the work is autobiographical. This novel was written to cater to Fern's existing fans/reading community, and the obvious autobiographical content of the novel actually earned her some public criticism (cite). In this way, Fern draws not only on the sympathetic connection between her readers

and the work, but also the connections among her readers, her work, her self, Ruth as her avatar, and the fictional reading community as a simulacrum of Fern's existing fans. Sentimentalism's deployment of sympathetic connections gave Fern, as a woman, a special mode of communication for engaging in these literary debates over fiction and morality that itself is intrinsically moral in the way it cultivates moral and emotional awareness in the reader through their identification with the sentimental characters, as well as acting as a vehicle for the co-construction of moral reading communities.

Thus far, I've discussed sentimentality primarily as a mode of communication among novelists and readers who were white women from the Northern states of antebellum America. Although it is true that literacy rates and participation in intellectual circles was higher in the richer, more urban North, literary activity was also rich in the South. Indeed, even among the enslaved black population of the South, individuals eked out literary expression in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. One author, Harriet Jacobs, recorded her fight for psychological freedom and liberation of her voice in the autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Although this book is designed to be an eyewitness account of slavery rather than a novel, key elements of sentimental rhetoric are re-appropriated by Jacobs to make searing points about morality, race, and the author's voice in antebellum America. Instead of focusing on authors or readers whose access to literacy is a given, Jacobs focuses on her own struggle to participate in reading communities and have her authorial voice heard, as well as the pain that is caused by

her exclusion from normative visions of American women through sentimental writing in particular.

Chapter 3, *Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl*

“You never knew what it is to be a slave”:

Sympathy, Race, and the Stakes of Sentimentalism

Published in 1861, Harriet Jacobs’ memoir *Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl* confronts gender, literacy, and morality in a way that Warner or Fern were too privileged to ever experience. Born a slave in North Carolina, Jacobs’ story of her privations under Southern chattel slavery and her struggle for freedom was published not as a sentimental novel but as part of the slave narrative genre of memoirs cultivated in large part by white female abolitionists. As made apparent in the paratexts, Jacobs’ narrative was shaped in certain ways by her white abolitionist benefactors, especially Lydia Maria Child. However, *Incidents* also draws heavily on the plot structure of the sentimental novel as well as the rhetorical strategies of sympathy that drove the popularity and salience of the sentimental novel. Through appropriating these ways of writing, Jacobs as an author enters the contemporary debates about literacy and morality from a liminal position: that of a black woman and freed slave. Her access to literacy in the memoir is more fraught with risk and reveals many of the harmful structures underlying slavery, so that her treatment of literate activities and reading communities is troubled by more than just abstract moral threats. Additionally, her status as an author—as the progenitor of literate materials and reading communities—is challenged, compromised, and held to a different standard because of her past choices and her identity. In grappling with the challenges to her authorship, especially in her paratexts, Jacobs addresses from a new perspective the moral and representational responsibilities of the reader, grounding

these moral debates in issues of literacy at the intersections of gender and race. In fact, Jacobs herself is firm about the fact that her account is not fictional, and the relationship between her acts of authorship and the need to differentiate truth from fiction in bearing witness to the suffering of slavery, and to her own life story, is revealing of her nuanced orientation toward the morality of fiction. This trope of slave narratives implies the value of the eyewitness account over a creatively constructed tale, but only when told by slaves. The huge success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* versus the intense insistence on the veracity of slave narratives reveals the double standard of truth and morality applied to former slaves and Black authors like Harriet Jacobs.

Finally, Jacobs directly references the literary conventions and rhetoric of the sentimental novel—as well as the subjectivities of the audience of white, Northern women which her slave narrative shares with the sentimental novel—throughout her story and calls into question the implications of the genre in moral terms when placed in the larger context of contemporary American race and gender politics. Jacobs asks her readers; when the sentimental novel privileges moral standards of purity, literacy, and intellectual fortitude, what is to become of slave women who are hampered by their bondage and their identities from achieving these ideals? When moralizing literature excludes and denies the morality of a subjected people, is this literature in fact moral? Beyond the critics' quibbling over whether or not fiction is moral, Jacobs asks us: what are the stakes of moralizing?

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is not properly a novel, yet its appropriation of sympathy and sentimental rhetoric, as well as Jacobs' position

toward her own authorship, make this work well worth considering in the overall construction of sentimentalism's relationship to debates over literacy and morality. Sitting in the margins of the sentimental tradition, *Incidents* yields precious evidence of a marginalized voice taking part in these debates: seeing the risks and rewards of literacy, fiction, and deception, while at the same time criticizing the moralizing fictions of the dominant culture. Jacobs was certainly less heard than Fern or Warner, and yet her understandings of the morality/literacy/truthfulness debates are far more sophisticated. *Incidents* is more than a slave narrative, more than of an artifact of these debates, and far more than simply a sentimental novel. Jacobs does not take positions on the morality/fiction debate in the same ways that Fern and Warner did, because she did not have the same access to public voice or even to normative white Christian morality. Instead, her work transcends these debates to point out the hypocrisy, racism, and oppressiveness of the very moralizing literature which the critics laud, while using the sentimental author's toolbox to simultaneously engage and criticize their reading communities. In this way, Jacobs herself is a sort of underground literary critic looking from the outside in on the canon formation and morality debates of American literature. In order to fully unearth the different ways in which Jacobs engages these issues, this chapter will diverge from the previous two in focusing more closely on a series of concepts—literacy, sympathy, and authorship—which Jacobs grapples with instead of narrowing in as much on a single scene or chapter. Because of the way Jacobs weaves these criticisms with craft and subtlety through each scene, every exhortation, and even in what is left out, focusing on a single close reading instead of a variety of quotes would not do Jacobs justice.

In the narrative, Jacobs introduces the reader to issues of literacy through her interactions with her grandmother, a freed slave. Indeed, Jacobs recounts her closeness to her grandmother when she was a small child protected her from much of the indignities of slavery for several years, and her eventual entry into servitude was that much more crushing for her tastes of freedom. After being removed from her grandmother, she was sent to be a maid to an elderly woman who, she says, “was so kind to me that I was always glad to do her bidding...with a heart as free from care as that of any free-born white child” (Jacobs 14). Literacy, in terms of the actual ability to read, was for Jacobs intrinsic to the experience of a dignified and comfortable lifestyle, for it is this mistress “in name only” that taught her to read (14). She writes, “While I was with her, she taught me to read and spell; and for this privilege, which so rarely falls to the lot of a slave, I bless her memory” (16). However, this dear mistress wills Harriet away as property after her death, becoming the first white woman in Harriet’s life to pity her but ultimately fail to acknowledge her humanity. It is thus the first indication of Harriet’s fraught relationship with literacy as well as her ambivalence toward “kind” white women whose places of privilege more often betray than protect her.

It is this skill and access to the written word that would not only help Jacobs find dignity in her memoir but also would help her escape in the form of letters. However, her new, cruel master would assault her with lewd messages in her teen years, and even her claims to illiteracy, which denigrated her actual intellectual achievements, could not protect her from his harassments: “One day he caught me teaching myself to write...Before long, notes were often slipped into my hand. I

would return them, saying, ‘I can't read them, sir.’ ‘Can't you?’ he replied; ‘then I must read them to you’ (50). Ironically, Jacobs depicts the danger of literacy coming not from fiction but from the messages of a respectable white man. It is the white male pillar of community who taints the innocence of this young girl in her early teens; his assault on her literate activities that would attempt to “persuade” her into participating in his adultery and pedophilia. The literary and cultural gatekeepers in this society (landed white men), rather than protecting the innocent reader in Jacobs’ world, forces her literate activity to sexually exploitative ends—in essence, he sexually assaults her right to literacy as much as he sexually harasses Harriet herself. In Harriet Jacobs’ perspective on literacy, it is not the choices and preferences of the young female reader, but the evil of the adult male, which gives literacy (fiction or not) its danger. He is the foil to Warner’s John, whose control over Ellen’s literacy is equally coercive but morally-focused—although this control would have been made more suspect had *The Wide, Wide World* been published with the missing chapter on Ellen and John’s marriage.

Indeed, Jacobs’ reckoning with her own sexuality is inextricably tied to her relationship with literacy, and indeed with the influence of the sentimental novel on narrative forms and moral codes at the time. A close reading of Chapter 10, the intersection of these forces in Jacobs’ life become clear and she reckons explicitly with the roles of normative white womanhood, sympathy and its moral implications, and the role of her readers. Indeed, Jacobs signals this chapter’s transformative role in her narrative by naming it “A Perilous Passage In The Slave Girl's Life” (82). It is Jacobs’ reflection on her decision to enter into an extramarital sexual relationship

with a white man, which marks her departure from defensive sexual innocence into making calculated romantic decisions based on her desires for both romance and freedom from slavery. This crucial turning point in her story as well as in her reflective self-presentation reveals for the first time Jacobs' fraught relationship to her own readers. I will provide the extended quote for analysis:

Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hated tyrant; you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice. I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others. (86)

At first, Jacobs expresses rather more conventional shame about her relationship with Mr. Sand. She says, "Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader!", addressing her primarily white, Northern, female readers, "You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom... I know I did wrong" (86). Here, she takes on a penitent pose toward how she has transgressed the boundaries of traditional, pure femininity. At the same time, she criticizes her readers' blissful ignorance of the violence faced by slave women. At the same time, Jacobs invites her readers to enter into sympathy with her and pity her situation, while also criticizing their privileged position as readers—only observers of her pain whose privilege would protect them from any direct knowledge of her tribulations.

Next, she justifies her decisions by explaining how she hoped they would free her from her "tyrant" master and that his assaults against her purity and sanity made

her “reckless in [her] despair” (84). Additionally, she emphasizes how she had no cultural structures defending her purity, as do white women, although she was still held to the same standards of morality by society at large (as felt by her readers and voiced by her grandmother). She reveals this perspective on black women’s impossible double standard by writing, “Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others” (86). She again engages in the push-pull of sympathy and criticism, both explaining herself in a bid for empathy and rejecting the expected reaction of shame (especially common in sentimental British novels about “fallen women”). Here, Jacobs also makes an uncharacteristically (for slave narratives) explicit criticism of the moral codes held by her women readers and forwarded by sentimental fiction. Jacobs shows how this moral code both excludes her and places her at risk by denying her value when her purity is no longer assured. By depicting her shame and struggle in dealing with the intersecting forces of race-based slavery and gender-based sexual violence, she shows the consequences of an exclusionary moral code on which sentimental novelists and their heroines both depend upon to defend the legitimacy of their fiction amid moral panic over literacy. She sets herself outside of the reading community created by her narrative, while simultaneously drawing her readers into her own calls for sympathy, co-opting sentimental rhetoric to criticize the very moral norms these novels reinforced.

In their rush to assert these moral codes of purity and innocence in young women, white sentimental writers excluded those, like Jacobs, who could not live up to the standard because of the oppressions they faced. Thus, Jacobs both appropriates

and criticizes sentimental rhetoric, bringing into question the ethics of creating a moralizing category of literate activity that excludes the most oppressed women. Just like sexuality, literacy is one of the ways in which her white masters attempt to control her. From her abusive male master, literacy is used to assault her innocence as a young girl through lewd notes. However, Jacobs does not leave her criticism of white society there. Slave narratives of this time were typically written for a female, white, northern audience, and for this reason often focused on the cruelty of Southern white men and pleads, either subtly or explicitly, for the sympathy of northern white women. However, Jacobs does not shy away from actually implicating these white women, who would normally serve as her primary audience, as contributing to her oppression. Specifically, she implicates the mores of moral and sexual purity, so often forwarded by sentimental novels, as contributing to her suffering through their institutionalization of moral standards which necessarily exclude those like Jacobs whose safety and sexual purity are not protected by society but indeed assaulted by it. Jacobs implicates the sentimental rhetoric of sympathy for making her a pitiable, rather than human, subject, who is both cried over and blamed for her own moral transgressions. In this way, Jacobs is the only author examined who refuses to meld herself into a full sympathetic connection with her reading community. Because Jacobs is excluded from the moral community by its privileged moral stances, she is also unable to wholly integrate them as a reading community centered around her novel. Thus, she both draws them in with sympathetic rhetoric and then criticizes the emptiness of their pity and the harmfulness of their moral norms. Jacobs' ability to both court and reject her audience is one of the most radical and noteworthy elements

of her narrative, by which she turns the connective power of sympathy into a complex dance of invitation and anger which challenges her audience to think reflexively about sentimentalism, privilege, sympathy, and what it means to be a pitying abolitionist benefitting from white privilege.

She returns to the issue of traditional sentimental rhetoric later in her narrative by confronting the standard story structure of sentimentalism, which she flouts. She writes, "Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free!" (302). She both acknowledges and rejects the expectations of the sentimental novel, couching her self-actualization in freedom from slavery rather than marrying. Indeed, she achieves part of the sentimental domestic dream—raising adoring children—without the support of a man, much like Ruth Hall. However, her independence is all the more hard-won. Just like Ellen and Ruth Hall, Jacobs remains free from marriage in her story, creating self-actualization through her slavery and womanhood independent of any heterosexual relationship. Indeed, all of the sentimental heroines thus far remain unmarried at the end of their stories, signaling, however subtly, their freedom of intellect and personhood, even while conforming to sentimental moral mores. Further, the contrast Jacobs draws between the assumed happiness and plenty of a marriage-ending and the meager but all the more meaningful status of freedom from slavery that is her "happy ending" is yet another criticism of the privilege and oppressive moralism of the cult of feminine morality which she has criticized throughout her novel. She sees, at the same time, both the capacity for literacy to center her own story as well as the danger of the prevailing uses of fiction which contribute to her systematic oppression, but as a slave

and as a woman. Fictional literacy—in the form of false letters—was crucial to Jacobs’ successful escape from slavery. Jacobs’ ability to deploy the literacy once used to contain her (through Flint’s abuse) in order to manipulate her enemies and free herself is a powerful display of reclamation, in which literacy becomes Jacobs’ weapons.

Indeed, the ability to tell her own story is far more complicated than simple access to literacy. Although Warner and Jacobs’ would both have encountered some degree of criticism as female authors, the pressures upon Jacobs to prove her own intelligence, veracity, and capacity for authorship were far more. In the era of slave narratives (and indeed even for slave authors like Phyllis Wheatley) it was common for some white benefactors to add paratexts to the work to use their racial privilege to vouch for the Black author. In this case, the benefactor is noted abolitionist, and Jacobs’ editor, Lydia Maria Child. In her “Introduction by the Editor,” Child echoes the assertions Jacobs had previously made in her preface about the veracity of the material, and further vouches for Jacobs’ intelligence. She writes that “those who know her will not be disposed to doubt her veracity” (7). She continues to assert Jacobs’ intelligence, and dispel criticism that a slave could not write her own tale: “nature endowed [Jacobs] with quick perceptions [and] the mistress...taught her to read and spell” (8). Having deployed her privilege as a white writer in support of Jacobs, Child also notably minimizes her own role in constructing the tale, using the unusual (for slave narratives) move of directly and vocally affirming Jacobs’ skill and authority as an author who can not only bear witness to her own story but also use language effectively: “I had no reason for changing her lively and dramatic way of

telling her own story” (8). However, Jacobs does not simply allow Child to speak for her.

Jacobs also vouches for her own authorial ability in her own introduction in which she insists on the value and veracity of her own work. The letter shows us two things: 1) that she sees fictionality as denigrating to her own testimonial story but not as in itself immoral 2) her strategic knowledge of her relationship as an author to her prospective audience. Jacobs is gently clear about her story being truthful, and indeed her value as a storyteller and legitimacy as a person rest upon it. However, she does not follow the normative track of moralizing authors of her time by criticizing fiction. She simply says, “I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself; on the contrary, it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history...I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens” (6). By using words like “testimony,” Jacobs asserts the authenticity of her tale but also acknowledges the role of authorship, writing, and creativity in her tale by saying that “I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North” (6). In this way, Jacobs acknowledges the role of rhetoric and authorship even in the act of witnessing. Further, she continues this sentence with an acknowledgment of her audience, writing, “I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse” (6). Here, Jacobs signals her intended audience and intended effect. She intends to work her rhetoric upon them, and at the same time acknowledges their separation from her subjectivity as privileged, Northern white women. Jacobs is in some ways even more

aware of her role of author than Warner or Fern because of her acute knowledge of her separation from them as well as her explicit rhetorical goals.

Unlike Warner and Fern, Jacobs cannot belong to the same reading community as her readers, and thus must guide them by rhetoric (persuasion and instruction) rather than by example (like Ruth Hall did). This is where the connection to sentimental novels comes in: in order to successfully affect her readers, Jacobs must use the tropes of fiction with which they are familiar. In her introduction, indeed, Jacobs already had formulated the ways that she would be deploying literary styles to make her point. Through her push-pull with her reading community, through her implication of both literary gatekeepers and sympathetic readers in the oppression of Black women, and even through her own half-humble half-defiant representation of her own authorship, Jacobs engages with the central issues of women/morality/fiction/literacy that captivated American literature in the antebellum period, with a different depth and from an outside perspective that most other sentimental novelists could never have appreciated.

All of the books examined so far are crucial for the study of American literature, not least because of their contribution to the development of American ideals about fiction and morality. We began with a consideration of the critical responses to sentimental novels, and examined Warner's novel as both a bastion of the sentimental novel and a self-aware, subtly resistant participant in the morality/fiction debates. Warner is far from the only writer of the genre of sentimental novels who contributed meaningfully to contemporary literary debates about the morality of fiction. Fanny Fern takes a more liberal approach to her

morality, placing individual boldness over retiring obedience, and is all the more strident in her defense of the female author. Her contributions to the new American vision of fiction prizes individuality, fierce motherhood, and independent intellectual self-actualization. She creates a Bildungsroman of the woman as author that hits many of the same notes as *The Wide, Wide World* while marching to the beat of her own drum. Jacobs, meanwhile, sees beyond the arguments over shades of morality and types of fiction to reveal to her readers (not without making them work for it) the structures of racial power which undergird their bickering on shades of morality and categories of fiction, giving readers and scholars alike a glimpse at the subaltern view of American consensus-forming over the roles and value of literature. Unpacking this diversity within the genre is crucial to understanding that the sentimental genre is by no means monolithic or didactic, and thus to understanding the participation of these works in the debates over novels.

These books are hardly the monolithic and homogenous genre of senseless emotionality and “pale and pious” girlhood which old-fashioned detractors long cast them as. Indeed, Ann Douglass’ very insistence on the word “pale” to cast aspersions of weakness on the sentimental heroine betrays her failure to consider the roles of sentimental rhetoric and sympathy in slave narratives by Black women like Harriet Jacobs—as an escaped slave, hardly pale nor shrinking. Later critics—Tompkins, Halpern—have sensed the underlying importance of these works to the history of American literature. Their work has been insightful in their placing these works in the contexts of their authors and reading communities, and critical to keeping their critical study alive in eras in which emotional storytelling, conventional plots, and

women's private life worlds were seen as falling short of contemporary literary standards.

However, it is time to investigate these works with a critical awareness of their canonical exclusion and an eye for how these authors and characters were not just artifacts of, but meaningful contributors to, important American debates about what literature is and what literature does. I hope that further scholarship on the antebellum novel will deepen the academy's understanding of the key roles these novels played in negotiating the value, responsibilities, and potential of American fiction at a time when the nation had a unique opportunity to define its own literary and moral standards. We must dispel the myth of the monolithic, didactic sentimental "domestic" novel and its feminine melodrama and replace it with sensitive scholarship of these rich and nuanced books which do more than their critics ever did to define and re-negotiate the nature of American fiction. Without doing the hard work of reaching past the barrier of the traditional canon, it is impossible to fully understand the intellectual genealogy of American fiction. When we re-establish these women's contributions to literary theory, we unearth a more complete story of American literature.

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