

SENTIMENTAL APPROPRIATIONS: CONTEMPORARY SYMPATHY
IN THE NOVELS OF GRACE LUMPKIN, JOSEPHINE JOHNSON, JOHN STEINBECK,
MARGARET WALKER, OCTAVIA BUTLER, AND TONI MORRISON

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ABSTRACT

JENNIFER A. WILLIAMSON: *Sentimental Appropriations: Contemporary Sympathy in the Novels of Grace Lumpkin, Josephine Johnson, John Steinbeck, Margaret Walker, Octavia Butler, and Toni Morrison*
(Under the direction of Linda Wagner-Martin)

This project investigates the appearance of the nineteenth-century American sentimental mode in more recent literature, revealing that the cultural work of sentimentalism continues in the twentieth-century and beyond. By examining working-class literature that adopts the rhetoric of “feeling right” in order to promote a proletarian ideology as well as neo-slave narratives that wrestle with the legacy of slavery, this study explores the ways contemporary authors engage with familiar sentimental tropes and ideals. Despite modernism’s influential assertion that sentimentalism portrays emotion that lacks reality or depth, narrative claims to feeling—particularly those based in common and recognizable forms of suffering—remain popular. It seems clear that such authors as Grace Lumpkin, Josephine Johnson, John Steinbeck, Margaret Walker, Octavia Butler, and Toni Morrison apply the rhetorical methods of sentimentalism to the cultural struggles of their age.

Contemporary authors self-consciously struggle with sentimentalism’s gender, class, and race ideals; however, sentimentalism’s dual ability to promote these ideals and extend identification across them makes it an attractive and effective mode for political and social influence. The authors in this study draw upon common sentimental themes such as vulnerable womanhood, motherhood and family, caregiving and domesticity, death and the fear of separation, and Christian salvation to establish sympathy for “Othered” members of society.

Sentimental literature not only helped mark private and public spaces, but it also redefined the family as more than just a biological or economic unit—it bound the family in terms of affection and love. Like their nineteenth-century predecessors, contemporary authors expand the definitions of family and kinship in order to develop sympathy for those who have been cast as outsiders and “Others.” This study examines how contemporary authors modify the sentimental mode through narrative appropriation—adopting the perspectives and voices of “Others” and figuring them as legitimate objects of reader sympathy. Many current sentimental works appropriate the subjectivity of the “Other” in a form of colonial or postcolonial sympathy that assumes or critiques a universal western perspective that believes its power of sympathy to be so strong that it can effectively inhabit the “Others” it seeks to help and improve.

For my mother

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PREFACE

Critics and scholars of American literature have long held that the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries are supposedly “anti-sentimental.” Under the rising influences of what may appear to be more masculine modes of naturalism, realism, and modernism, contemporary authors and audiences are believed to reject the sentimental as feminized, old-fashioned, and unrealistic. However, this project reveals that the sentimental mode is alive and well in the modern era, as authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries continue the use of familiar nineteenth-century sentimental forms and tropes that reveal an ongoing engagement with sentimental expression that draws upon its ability to instruct and influence readers through emotional identification. In these texts sentimentalism appears as a key mode of political and social expression. As in the nineteenth-century sentimental novel, contemporary texts redefine the boundaries of the human family, emphasizing emotional relationships that are equated to kinship bonds in order to reorganize social boundaries and instruct readers to identify and sympathize with individuals generally configured as social “Others.”¹

As the popularity of romanticized stories of lovers from opposing social groups, superhero epics whose origins are tragic, and series about orphans who create families among wizards and other magical beings reveal, the narrative appeals of emotional connection and kinship ties have never faded for contemporary audiences. As twentieth-century critiques of

¹ Edward Said, in *Orientalism* (1978), theorized that Western beliefs about the Orient were constructed entirely from Western perspectives and assumptions, leading to a dominant worldview based on “The West” and “The Other.” Said’s ideas have since influenced literary, social, gender, and race theories which posit that white privilege and heteronormative society also follows this pattern, creating “Others” out of individuals who are not members of the dominant, hegemonic group.

sentimentalism increased awareness of individual subject positions and encouraged self-consciousness about the limitations of sympathy, however, many authors developed a technique of narrative appropriation—adopting the stories and voices of “Others” in order to figure them as legitimate objects of reader sympathy. These appropriated narratives engage in a critique of the failures of the sentimental—deconstructing nineteenth-century race, class, and gender ideologies promoted by sentimental ideals to various degrees—while also employing aspects of the sentimental mode.

Kathryn Stockett’s novel The Help, is a clear example of twenty-first century narrative appropriation. The novel tells the story of Skeeter, a young, white college graduate in 1960s Jackson, Mississippi, who seeks to publish the personal stories of the African American domestic workers who serve in middle class homes. Published in February 2009, as of September 2011, Stockett’s novel had spent 106 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list. It was made into a feature film that, upon its release, became the top-grossing movie three weekends in a row, earning \$98.6 million and expected to break \$100 million within days. The Help’s racial politics have made it a target of controversy, and critics have accused it of a range of offenses including downplaying the actual abuses and hardships experienced by domestic workers, ignoring the real dangers African Americans faced during the Jim Crow era, and glossing over the tumultuous struggles of the Civil Rights Movement. The Help’s critical defenders have been few—a handful of commentators suggest that the film and novel deserve credit for starting a vigorous public debate about race, white privilege, and cultural memory. Stockett herself has not openly commented on the controversy; instead, the novel’s and film’s popularity speak for themselves. People love this story. Specifically, it seems white, middle-class, middle-aged women love this story. These women stay up until 2am reading the book, assign it in book clubs, attend

the theatre in droves, feel sympathy for the domestic workers, and express happiness when the clearly racist white characters appear to be beaten by the novel's end. Anecdotally, everyone who wants to talk to me, a critic of the book and film, about The Help is either a white, middle class mother who loved, loved, loved it, or a scholar who is incensed by it. The primary critical commentary on the web is from African American scholars, columnists, and bloggers who critique The Help's racial politics and are responding to the frustratingly uncritical nostalgia and sympathy they see in everyday whites' responses. For example, Janelle Harris writes in her essay, "I Am Not The Help," for Clutch Online Magazine that "I can see some white lady now, giving me that tight-lipped, puppy dog look of empathy and saying, 'It's OK. I understand. I saw The Help.'" In the crowded movie theatre when I went to see the film, the rest of the audience were entirely white and middle-age; unlike me, they could probably remember the sixties. So, one question to ask is why this novel, about 1960s racism, about the abuses perpetuated by white women against black women, has so captured the attention and affection of contemporary white audiences. Why do we love The Help?

The answer is that The Help is a sentimental salve to white, privileged audiences. While acknowledging the cruelties of one of America's deepest cultural hurts—the legacy of slavery and the racism that has literally relegated groups of people to sub-human status and divided our country against itself—it absolves the beneficiaries of that privilege from the advantages they receive from that racism and their participation in perpetuating it. It does so by allowing contemporary white audiences to cast racism as a problem only of the past, to emotionally identify with racial "Others" by focusing on their common suffering, and to redefine racism in terms of a violation of affection.

African American women have a history of working in domestic service, and it is no

coincidence this 2009-11 blockbuster about domestic service is set in the 1960s Jim Crow era, contrasting today's complicated (supposedly "post-racial") racial conflicts to a time when racism appears more "real," overt, and intentional. Enslaved African American women and indentured servants have provided household labor throughout American history, and after the Civil War, African Americans in the South were mainly employed as sharecroppers, housekeepers, and caregivers, remaining in economic servitude. If Stockett's primary interest in The Help was to examine the hardships of housekeepers or the complex relationships between workers of color and white employers, she could easily have chosen to set her story in the present. According to a 2011 report by the Center for American Progress, an estimated 2.5 million people work every year in domestic service, and the racial demographics of this field have not changed much over the past century. Domestic Workers United & DataCenter together report that 95 percent of domestic workers in New York today are people of color, and 93 percent are women (10). Many are foreign-born. Numerous studies have been conducted on the physical, verbal, and sexual abuse committed against these women,² and domestic workers successfully organized to pass a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in New York State which went into effect on November 29, 2010. The Help, however, is not seeking to examine today's reality, and it does not question or critique the socioeconomic factors that have maintained domestic service as a field in which women of color serve white families. Instead, The Help nostalgically promotes the myth that those types of relationships are archaic—an institution of the past—thereby implying that the racist ideologies that supported them are also of the past.

Against a backdrop of bouffant hairdos and high waistlines, Ford Galaxy convertibles,

² See *Hidden in the Home: Abuse of Domestic Workers with Special Visas in the United States* (2001); *Home is Where the Work Is: Inside New York's Domestic Work Industry* (2006); *Domestic Workers: Human Rights Abuses and Discrimination in the Workforce* (Beach 2008); *Domestic Workers' Rights in the United States: A report prepared for the U.N. Human Rights Committee in response to the Second and Third Periodic Report of the United States* (n.d.); *The Color of Help: Workers of Color Dominate Domestic Services but Lack Union Rights* (2011).

Franki Valli's "Sherry," and ladies' clubs, The Help only gestures at the harsh realities of racial segregation by telling stories of individual acts of cruelty and blasé assumptions that African Americans are lesser beings. Not only do readers witness the cutting remarks and degrading comments that African American workers had to tolerate as part of their daily jobs, but Hilly Holbrook, Jackson's leading socialite, heads a farcical Junior League initiative to force all white homes to build separate bathrooms for their domestic workers. The novel and film make only passing references to the violence perpetrated on African Americans during this period, including Medgar Evers's murder in the very same town and the very real reasons the domestic workers are afraid to participate in Skeeter's project. In so doing, the narrative suggests that the racism and mistreatment these women suffer is a result of individual actions, of the deliberate meanness of their bad employers instead of the result of a larger social system that protects white power and privilege. As a recent graduate of Ole Miss and an aspiring writer who no longer feels that she fits into her wealthy friendship groups, the single and independent-minded Skeeter is uncomfortable at home, longs for a career, and is bothered by the way her friends treat their domestic servants. In short, she is a vehicle for the contemporary reader/viewer engaging with this time period—she is the lens for our current selves, a perspective that understands and sympathizes with that past but feels uncomfortable there. Because Skeeter, a white woman, disagrees with treating the housekeepers poorly, because she stands up to Hilly, because Hilly is humiliated and deposed from her social hierarchy, and because Skeeter helps the maids overcome their silence and share their stories, The Help suggests a kind of "kumbaya," feel-good activism in which racism can be and has been triumphed over. It implies that because Skeeter wins and everybody feels good in the end, racism has ended, and is—like Woolworth's soda shops—a relic of the past.

Despite suggesting that its major characters have triumphed over racism by socially humiliating their white employers, The Help closes well before the end of the Civil Rights Movement. The novel ends in July 1963, before the march on Washington and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, before the Alabama church bombing, before the 24th Constitutional Amendment, before the Freedom Summer, and before the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Because The Help closes the narrative before these important events and before the achievement of significant gains in racial equality, The Help suggests that its characters' personal struggles are part of the momentum leading to real social change. It also implies, by setting its action in the early 1960s, that because these kinds of struggles have since been eradicated, one must reach into the past beyond the Civil Rights Movement to understand this kind of racism, to a BCR period (Before Civil Rights) in which white women could treat African American women out of BCR ignorance and race-based cruelty. That was then, this is now, the comparison suggests.

What is easily overlooked, however, is that nothing changes for the domestic servants as a result of publishing their book. The process of sharing their stories is certainly cathartic because their voices are being heard for the first time. However, while everyone feels very good, nothing actually improves for anyone but Skeeter. Other than the occasional snarky comment, she does not contradict her friends or openly campaign for Civil Rights. Her mission to record and publish the personal stories of domestic workers is prompted by her desire to achieve a career with a New York publishing house—the editor tells her "Don't waste your time on the obvious things. Write about what disturbs you, particularly if it bothers no one else" (71). Although she becomes personally invested in the process of telling these stories, sides with the women against employers who abuse them, and discovers along the way that her own mother

had unfairly dismissed her family's longtime housekeeper, Skeeter is driven as much by the need to publish a book that matters to her career as a book that matters. Due to safety concerns, the book is published anonymously, but the maids and their employers are easily identified because of the personal details contained within it. Although Minnie, one of the three narrators of the novel, publishes a particularly embarrassing story in the book about Hilly to ensure that she will protect herself by insisting that the stories aren't from Jackson, the maids know that they have exposed themselves to possible retribution. Indeed, Aibileen, the other African American narrator, is fired from her job, and she chooses to retire from domestic work entirely, knowing that she is now unemployable. But as she leaves her employer's house, she thinks, "I'm free I head down the hot sidewalk at eight thirty in the morning wondering what I'm on do with the rest a my day. The rest of my life In thirty minutes, my whole life's...done. Maybe I ought to keep writing, not just for the paper, but something else, about all the people I know and the things I seen and done. Maybe I ain't too old to start over" (444).

*Skeeter, meanwhile, achieves exactly what she had hoped; she is offered a job in New York and plans to leave Mississippi. Although she expresses some concern about what will happen to Minnie, Aibileen, and the other women after she leaves, Minnie tells her that "I'm on take care a Aibileen and she gone take care a me. But you got nothing left here but enemies in the Junior League and a mama that's gone drive you to drink. You done burned ever bridge there is. And you ain't never gone get another boyfriend in this town and everybody know it. So don't walk your white butt to New York, run it" (424). By framing Aibileen's firing as a move toward freedom and closing with Skeeter's relocation to New York, *The Help* suggests that the problems in Jackson have been resolved. It glosses over the serious economic quandary in which Aibileen has been left. It does not consider any consequences that other maids who participated*

in the project may experience, ranging from firing to violent retribution when lynching is a real risk during this historical period. In fact, Ernestine, one of the collaborating maids, tells Aibileen that another maid was nearly fired over the book but her employer told her “if Hilly wasn’t telling everybody it’s not Jackson I’d fire you so quick your head would spin . . . I can’t fire you or people will know I’m Chapter Ten. You’re stuck working here for the rest of your life” (434). Nor has publishing the book led to an end to the bathroom segregation movement, domestic work reforms, or greater Civil Rights. What the reader/viewer knows, however, is that Civil Rights do eventually come, and because this feel-good story occurs before those events, this narrative is situated as though it participates in some way in the efforts to overturn entrenched racism. Thus, readers delight in Skeeter’s happy ending and don’t worry about the women she leaves behind.

*One of the attractions of *The Help* for white audiences is that they emotionally identify with both Skeeter and with the African American housekeepers. It is significant that readers and viewers do not primarily identify with the white, middle-class socialites and employers of the book and film with whom they actually have the most in common in terms of race, gender, and class. Stockett achieves this sympathetic identification by emphasizing the common suffering between Skeeter and the maids, expanding that circle to include the audience. It is a move very similar to that conducted by Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, whereby Stowe encouraged white, middle-class women to sympathize with the suffering of enslaved mothers by equating the loss of a child through sale to the loss of a child through death—the despair prompted by a mother’s grief became a universal symbol of suffering that humanized African American women for white audiences and allowed them to relate to their suffering when families were forcibly separated. In *The Help*, Skeeter is cast as a perpetual outsider, the weak member of the “mean girl” herd. She’s portrayed as the constant subject of her mother’s (and at times,*

*her friends') criticism for being unpolished and unattractive with bad hair, no boyfriend, and no real power within the social hierarchy of Jackson. Her only source of comfort and support has been Constantine, the family maid who raised her and is now gone. Skeeter's ability to see the ways that Aibileen, Minnie, and the other maids are hurt and offended by their treatment is a result of her own sensitivity to outsider status. Her racial consciousness comes from her emotional identification with what it feels like to be treated as less than equal. However, as Skeeter slowly learns, racial "Otherness" is much more hurtful and dangerous than what she has experienced personally. Yet, because *The Help* creates this sympathy through Skeeter's identification with the "mean girl" paradigm, much of the racism in the book is cast in terms of high school-style exclusionary behavior. Racism, for Jackson housekeepers, is largely portrayed as a series of social slights—public insults, degrading comments, and, rather than being forced to eat at the "losers" table in the cafeteria, maids must occupy segregated racial spaces. Contemporary audiences, well versed in modern take-downs of "mean girl" and high school culture, relate to these kinds of social "Othering," which transcend race but provide a metaphor for the social separations and hurt feelings that occur as a result of racism. Thus, *The Help* provides a mechanism by which audiences bypass emotional identification with those closest to themselves in the text, those whose race and class positions place them in power both in the past and present culture. Instead, the text invites audiences to emotionally identify with the struggles and apparent triumphs of *The Help's* underdogs.*

*Another way in which *The Help* encourages emotional identification is its process of narration: Stockett appropriates the first-person voices of two African American characters in order to invite closer sympathetic identification by the reader. Skeeter, Aibileen, and Minnie take turns narrating the novel. With 13 chapters totaling 184 pages of narration, Skeeter's voice*

dominates the novel and serves as the anchor for the text. She is the vehicle carrying contemporary audiences into the narrative. (The film adapts this technique by primarily focusing on Skeeter's perspective while interspersing her storyline with scenes of Aibileen and Minnie at work and at home). Aibileen narrates eleven chapters (119 pages) and Minnie narrates nine chapters (97 pages), supplementing Skeeter's view of events and revealing another side of life in Jackson. Notably, Skeeter's chapters are written in Standard English with no indications of Southern dialect despite her Mississippi background, a convention which generally goes unremarked because Standard English, as the term suggests, is intended to serve as a universal norm. It is a kind of Everyman's rhetoric, used when the language isn't meant to call attention to itself. However, Stockett chose to write the Aibileen and Minnie chapters in an imitation of African American patois. For example:

I walk real slow through my yard, wondering what it's gone be now. Miss Skeeter stand up, holding her pocketbook tight like it might get snatched. White peoples don't come round my neighborhood less they toting the help to and fro, and that is just fine with me. I spend all day long tending to white peoples. I don't need em looking in on me at home. (101)

Such rhetoric calls attention to the differences in the women's race and class, but not enough to make it unreadable. While Skeeter's speech, like her race, goes unremarked and assumes a universal experience, Aibileen and Minnie's language is marked as different, just as their bodies indicate difference by the color of their skin.

Rather than obscuring understanding or consistently calling attention to the ways in which Aibileen, Minnie, and the African American women they represent are always different or "Other," however, Stockett's appropriation of their voices invites reader identification and sympathy. By placing their narratives alongside Skeeter's, Stockett suggests a parallel exists between the women's stories and perspectives. The African American "dialect" Stockett employs

is also only a mild variation upon Standard English, occasionally interspersing “Southernized” words or phrases but leaving the basic grammatical structure intact (altering “going” to “gone,” using regional verbs like “toting” instead of “carrying” or “bringing”). It is easy for a reader of Standard English to figure out the intended meaning because it mimics familiar speech patterns. The style of narration also gestures at familiar “mammy language” from plantation films and novels, which is easily readable to general audiences and has been used to provide humor and “local color.” The Help’s first and last chapters are narrated by Aibileen, so that Skeeter’s personal “growth” or bildungsroman emphasis of the novel is framed by the warm, storytelling tone of a woman similar to the maid Skeeter credits with raising her. Thus, while nodding to the differences between Aibileen, Minnie, and Skeeter, Stockett’s appropriation of “Othered” voices suggests that readers truly can cross racial boundaries, can “get inside” these women and see through their eyes. In the tradition of William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Stockett’s gesture is a controversially imaginative exploration in which she tries not just to describe sympathetically the experiences of “Others” but to give voice to them. As Stockett explains in her afterword:

I don’t presume to think that I know what it really felt like to be a black woman in Mississippi, especially in the 1960s . . . I’m pretty sure I can say that no one in my family ever asked Demetrie [her family’s housekeeper] what it felt like to be black in Mississippi, working for our white family. It never occurred to us to ask. It was everyday life. It wasn’t something people felt compelled to examine. I have wished, for many years, that I’d been old enough and thoughtful enough to ask Demetrie that question. She died when I was sixteen. I’ve spent years imagining what her answer would be. And that is why I wrote this book. (451)

By imagining her way into the position of her fictional maids, Stockett invites contemporary audiences to imagine themselves in those positions as well. When Aibileen and Minnie express frustration, fear, uncertainty, and pain, their narration seems to offer a direct opportunity to the reader that is unmediated and untempered by white guilt or white response. The irony, of course,

is that Stockett, a white woman, is the one writing the novel and imagining Aibileen and Minnie, so the entire experience is a product of white consciousness. But the effect of casting this perspective within the lens of African American voice is to bring white readers in closer sympathy with a subjectivity that is usually inaccessible, foreign, or “Other.”

Following in the traditions of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, The Help seeks to redefine the boundaries of the family according to affection, expanding beyond biological—and in this case racial—boundaries. In so doing, The Help also redefines the most deeply disturbing crime of racism as a violation of that familial affection. In Stockett’s world, which builds upon plantation tradition and mythology, African American women raise white children and love them as their own, often loving them more deeply than the children’s own biological mothers. Those children eventually grow up to become adults who inherit the social power of white supremacy and disavow previous ties of affection with their nursemaids and housekeepers. The novel opens and closes with chapters narrated by Aibileen and focusing on the relationship she has developed with Mae Mobley, the daughter of her employer. In the opening paragraph, Aibileen explains: “Mae Mobley was born on a early Sunday morning in August, 1960. A church baby we like to call it. Taking care a white babies, that’s what I do, along with all the cooking and cleaning. I done raised seventeen kids in my lifetime. I know how to get them babies to sleep, stop crying, and go in the toilet bowl before they mamas even get out a bed in the morning” (1). Rather than beginning her narrative with statements about her own life, Aibileen immediately focuses on the white child (and past white children) she has raised and loves. Aibileen is portrayed as a more loving, more competent, more compassionate mother to Mae Mobley Leefolt than the disinterested, socially conscious “Miss” Leefolt. Aware that Mae Mobley absorbs the unkind treatment of her biological mother, Aibileen worries that the little girl may grow up to

forget compassion and turn her insecurity into abuse of others. Thus, Aibileen, who calls Mae Mobley “my special baby,” tries to instill the idea that she is valued and loved: “I get to wondering, what would happen if I told her she something good, every day? . . . I hold her tight and whisper, ‘You a smart girl. You a kind girl, Mae Mobley. You hear me?’ And I keep saying it till she repeat it back to me” (2, 92). These are the words of wisdom that Aibileen tries to impart to the toddler when she is fired at the end of the novel, saying good-bye in the final pages and the final scenes of the film. As both Mae Mobley and Aibileen cry over their forced separation, Aibileen sees a vision of the child grown up:

I look deep into her rich brown eyes and she look into mine. Law, she got old-soul eyes, like she done lived a thousand years. And I swear I see, down inside, the woman she gone grow up to be. A flash from the future. She is tall and straight. She is proud. She got a better haircut. And she is remembering the words I put in her head. Remembering as a full-grown woman. (443)

Aibileen and Mae Mobley enact the relationship cycle that had also occurred between Skeeter and the now-absent Constantine. Revealed through a series of flashbacks in the film and reminiscences in Skeeter’s narrative, Constantine is clearly the mother figure that raised Skeeter, bolstered her confidence throughout her formative years, and triggered her racial awareness. When Skeeter returns home from college, she is shocked to find Constantine absent and no longer working for her family. Her mother refuses to provide clear answers about why Constantine is no longer there, and she can’t understand how the woman who had raised her would have left suddenly without even writing a letter. As Skeeter grew up, Constantine provided her with affection and love, countering the barrage of criticism she received from her mother and others about her looks and her inability to fit in. Like Aibileen, Constantine urges Skeeter to consider her inward qualities; the first time Skeeter is called ugly, it is Constantine who discovers her weeping. She asks Skeeter, “Well? Is you?” and advises her that “Ugly live up on

the inside. Ugly be a hurtful, mean person. Is you one of them peoples?” (62). Thus, The Help suggests that it is this affectional bond that educates young women to look past racial difference and discover human similarity, prompting social change. By loving their charges and receiving love, Constantine and Aibileen teach through feeling. Skeeter’s activism—if one can call it that—is prompted by her love of Constantine and her extended sympathy toward women in similar positions. By closing on Aibileen’s vision of Mae Mobley, a version of Skeeter as a child, Stockett suggests that, through the power of their love, housekeepers and maids can educate a new generation of white children who will be stronger than their parents and not embrace racist ideologies.

Unfortunately, The Help does not address the fact that the mean, racist white employers who abuse these African American housekeepers were likely themselves raised in similar situations by women such as Aibileen and Constantine but did not absorb this message of love or grow up to become anti-racist. By treating racism as a problem of affection and individual meanness, it suggests that it can be remedied through individual relationships and loving bonds but neglects to seriously consider the strength of existing power structures that place pressure on those relationships. One interesting illustration of the problem of casting racism in terms of a violation of affection occurs with the confrontation between Skeeter and her mother over Constantine. The novel and film adaption of The Help present this confrontation and its outcome a little differently. In the novel, Constantine’s daughter Lulabelle was given away at birth and lives in Chicago but came to Jackson as an adult to be reunited with her mother. Light enough to pass for white, she nonchalantly interrupts a Daughters of the American Revolution chapter at the house and chats with its members, offending Skeeter’s mother with her brazenness: “A Negro in my home. Trying to act white” (363). Skeeter’s mother not only tells Constantine to make her

daughter leave, but she also confronts Lulabelle and reveals a hurtful secret about her past. Skeeter's mother, in later sharing this story, appears unrepentant and only saddened and surprised that Constantine left after the encounter to go back to Chicago with her daughter. However, she does cry when Skeeter begins to weep: "Mother sniffs, keeping her eyes straight ahead. She quickly wipes her eyes 'I knew you'd blame me when it—it wasn't my fault'" (365). In the film, however, Lulabelle is clearly African American and accidentally interrupts the DAR. She is still bold, however, knocking on the front door and attempting to walk through the room instead of going around the house to the back entrance to wait for Constantine. Skeeter's mother is pained by the confrontation but openly pressured by the head of the DAR to dismiss Constantine on the spot. When Skeeter confronts her mother in the film, she insists she had no other choice but shows deep remorse for firing Constantine because she sees how deeply she has hurt Skeeter. In both instances, Skeeter's mother is subject to social pressure to maintain racial boundaries, as evidenced by the presence of the DAR. In the novel, she shows less affection for Constantine and less awareness of what she might have felt. In both versions, however, Skeeter's mother realizes she has done something wrong because she has hurt her own daughter. What should be a moment of racial awakening is actually a moment of emotional sensitivity to her own daughter—her mother regrets hurting Skeeter but does not acknowledge the larger issues of racial inequality at the root of her treatment of Constantine and Lulabelle. The novel makes clear that Constantine died shortly after returning to Chicago, and the implication—which the film makes explicit—is that Constantine dies of a broken heart, as though the deepest hurt was not the years of racism or abuse, nor the physical toll of years of hard work upon her body, but that she had been cast out of her "white family."

The Help is a powerful reminder that racial minorities and the working class remain the

*primary inheritors of a sentimental tradition that dates back to the nineteenth-century. Drawing upon familiar and well-established nineteenth-century constructions of race, class, and gender identity as well as configurations of nuclear and extended families, contemporary sentimentalism is founded upon white, middle-class social structures but invites sympathetic identification with “Others.” Nineteenth-century sentimentalism required a clear boundary between what readers recognized as the idealized “self” and the sympathetic “Other” because it was in the process of defining the white, middle-class family that was headed by an educated, honorable, Christian woman charged with guiding her family’s moral and social development. Today’s sentimentalism allows for closer identification between the “self” and the “Other.” Many current sentimental works appropriate the subjectivity of the “Other” in a form of colonial or postcolonial sympathy that assumes or critiques a universal western perspective that believes itself able to understand and inhabit the “Others” it seeks to help and improve. As the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries have progressed, modern, postmodern, and postcolonial critiques have promoted greater self-awareness among authors and audiences about the efficacy (or lack thereof) of sympathy and white, middle-class perspectives. Thus, contemporary authors either draw upon its recognizable codes to—like *The Help*—reassure audiences composed of the dominant racial and class group about the power of sympathy, or—like the texts to be discussed in the following study—to critique dominant ideologies and provide moral and political instruction.*

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Sentimentalism and the “Anti-Sentimental” Twentieth Century

The Sentimental Novel

The sentimental novel dominated women’s writing of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, achieving enormous popularity and commercial success. It is a literary form written primarily “by, for, and about women” and associated with the Cult of True Womanhood idealizing white middle-class female domesticity and the values of Christianity, propriety, and decorum (Tompkins 124-25). American sentimentalism developed from eighteenth-century British literature of sensibility, with its emphasis on charity and common feeling.³ Among the earliest British novels that popularized sentimentalism were Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747-48); Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766); Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey* (1768); and Henry Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling* (1771).

Such nineteenth-century texts as Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Fanny Fern’s *Fern Leaves from Fanny’s Portfolio*

³ For more information on sensibility and sentimentality, see Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (1996); Ann Jessie Van Sant, *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel: The Senses in Social Context* (1993); and G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (1992). Additional information can be found in Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (1986); David Marshall, *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau, and Mary Shelley* (1988); and Robert Markley, “Sentimentality as Performance: Shaftesbury, Sterne, and the Theatrics of Virtue,” in *The New Eighteenth Century*, ed. Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown (1987). Fred Kaplan draws upon Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) in *Sacred Tears: Sentimentality in Victorian Literature* (1987), where he contrasts sentimentality, as expressive of “innate moral sentiment” (and associated with the “man of sentiment,” a Victorian hero), to “sensibility,” a response to external stimuli (associated with the “man of feeling,” the Romantic hero).

(1854),⁴ Maria Susanna Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (1854), and Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* (1855) relied on depictions of the inherent goodness of human nature, the importance of emotional connection to others, and the power of feelings as a guide to right conduct for a vulnerable female protagonist as well as for the reader. They drew upon and helped to create the American culture of sentiment and placed women at the center of this social order. Women's writing was extraordinarily successful during this period, thriving on the literary marketplace in the 1830s and 1840s and rising to enormous popularity by the 1850s and 1860s. According to Nina Baym, "[h]istorians of bestsellers usually identify Susan Warner's [*The Wide, Wide World*] as the work that brought the very concept of the best seller into existence" (*Woman's Fiction* xi). Indeed, *The Wide, Wide World* went through fourteen editions in two years of publication, while Fern's *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* sold 70,000 copies in one year, far outselling the works of such now-canonized authors as Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Melville.

Comparatively, Thoreau's *Week on the Concord and Merrimack River* sold only 219 copies in four years, while an 1853 Harper's warehouse fire destroyed all but 60 remaining copies of *Moby-Dick*, a book in such small demand that the text was not reissued until ten years later, and then sold an average of six copies a year (Foster, FS 22). *The Scarlet Letter* sold only 10,000 copies in Hawthorne's lifetime (Baym, "Introduction" ix). Meanwhile, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was first published serially in 1851, so the public was eager for its appearance in novel form in 1852. It sold over 10,000 copies in the first week (Patkus and Schlosser), and 305,000 copies before the end of the year (Williams 181). It was published in England a year

⁴ Fanny Fern was a pseudonym for Sara Parton Willis, who first began publishing her work in 1851. She was widowed in 1846 at the death of her husband, a banker named Charles Eldredge, and left with nothing to support her children once his creditors had been paid off. She began publishing in 1851, and by 1853 she was a literary star. After publishing three novels, Robert Bonner enlisted her to write for the *New York Ledger*, and Fern became one of the first celebrity journalists. All of her work was published under the name, "Fanny Fern," and for clarity, this study will refer to Fern as the author of the texts under discussion.

later, where more than a million and a half copies were sold (Patkus and Schlosser). Cummins's *The Lamplighter*, published two years later, sold 40,000 copies in the first month of its publication and 60,000 copies by the end of the first year (Baym, "Introduction" ix). Fern's *Ruth Hall* reportedly sold 70,000 copies in its first year (Smith, SB xxxiv). "[I]n the seventeen years between the appearance of Warner's novel early in 1851 and Augusta Evans Wilson's *St. Elmo* late in 1867," Baym observes, "one formula blockbuster after another dominated the market" (*Woman's Fiction* xi).

Nineteenth-century American women writers built upon a growing field of sentimental culture as well as domestic literature. Nancy Armstrong argues in *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987) that such texts as conduct books as well as novels about women's home life, social customs, romantic entanglements, and marital arrangements created new forms of social power for women in the eighteenth-century. She contends that writers ranging from Samuel Richardson to the Brontës, Jane Austen, and Virginia Woolf focused on new forms of female identity as a central component to an emerging middle class, economic distinctions that were based on financial status, social behavior, and moral quality. Rather than presenting women who are desirable purely for their "rank and fortune"—their station in the aristocracy—these texts "exalted a woman whose value resided chiefly in her femaleness rather than in the traditional signs of status, a woman who possessed emotional depth rather than a physically stimulating surface, one who, in other words, excelled in the very qualities that differentiated her from the male" ("Some Call it Fiction" 576). However, Armstrong observes, "it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that the project of defining people on the basis of gender began to acquire some of the immense political influence it still exercises today. Around the 1830s, one can see the discourse of sexuality relax its critical gaze on the aristocracy as the

newly forming working classes became a more obvious target of moral reform.”

Nina Baym extends this examination of women’s writing in nineteenth-century American literature in *Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and About Women in America, 1820-70* (1978), where she shows that popular women’s writing developed from the domestic tradition but that it was by no means the celebration of idyllic domestic life that some critics have assumed. Although many of the texts Baym discusses could be classified as sentimental fiction, Baym groups her selected texts by plot commonalities—those which follow the social decline and moral rise of a young woman at risk in the world. She argues that in the nineteenth century, the domestic setting is largely an acknowledgement of the worlds inhabited by these women and provides an opportunity for women to analyze the benefits and problems associated with the limited powers of their confinement to—or the rare opportunities to move beyond—the domestic sphere. According to Baym:

Their fiction is mostly about social relations, generally set in homes and other social spaces that are fully described. The detailed descriptions are sometimes idealized, but more often simply “realistic.” And, in accordance with the needs of plot, home life is presented, overwhelmingly, as unhappy. There are very few intact families in this literature, and those that are intact are unstable or locked into routines of misery. Domestic tasks are arduous and monotonous; family members oppress and abuse each other; social interchanges are alternately insipid or malicious. Domestic setting and description, then, do not by any means imply domestic idyll. (26-27)

Inaugurated by Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s *New-England Tale* (1822), Baym’s study suggests that women’s novels throughout the nineteenth century advocated—sometimes unintentionally—a right to individual personhood that had not traditionally been available to women. She also argues that, with its focus on comfortable but practical living spaces; its condemnation of flirtatious, indolent, and wealthy ladies of leisure; its benevolent attitude toward servants who support heroines but stay within the working class; and its emphasis on an innate quality that allows a heroine to rise out of her degraded status and learn her moral lesson—whatever that

may be—the genre is middle class and “proud of it” (xxi).

Defining the sentimental novel or classifying sentimental fiction as a genre is more difficult than a twentieth-century reader might assume. Because of the ways in which “sentimental” and “sentimentalism” have become pejorative terms today, addressing sentimental fictions as a group can mistakenly involve assuming that the genre names a coherent body of works that follow a neatly circumscribed common plot-line or narrative structure and that the writing is “bad” because it requires the use of overdetermined tropes and highly emotional scenes. In fact, there exists some debate about certain texts that should or should not be classified within the genre of “sentimental fiction” because of the ways in which they challenge plot conventions associated with the large body of sentimental works. For example, Hawthorne excepted *Ruth Hall* from his general condemnation of women’s writing and sentimental fiction because he was impressed by the text’s style, writing to his publisher William Ticknor, “I must say I enjoyed it a great deal. The woman writes as if the devil was in her, and that is the only condition under which a woman ever writes anything worth reading” (Person 24). Fern’s novel is tentatively considered within the canon of sentimental literature because it includes sentimental scenes and tropes, but its position is frequently challenged because it is not so focused upon the domestic as many sentimental texts and it advocates for a woman’s independent professionalization in the public realm.

Joanne Dobson, in her 1997 article “Reclaiming Sentimental Literature,” advocates for a way to define and understand the genre that is based upon a literary analysis of textual structure rather than cultural interpretation. Although many narrative elements connect the novels produced within the sentimental genre, plot alone cannot define it. As Baym has pointed out, there is a pattern of women’s writing that extends beyond sentimental literature; similarly,

writers of sentimental literature explored different plot formations in order to develop varied social commentaries that will trouble any critic who seeks to define the genre based solely on storyline. Sentimental literature can be difficult to define, but there is a distinct correlation among the texts, and it helps scholars to define this connection in order to understand how sentimentalism operates and to argue against the traditional denigration that has occurred in the twentieth century by critics who dismiss sentimental texts for their emotionality, femininity, and “bad writing.” Shirley Samuels has noted that sentimentality “appears not so much a genre as an operation or a set of actions within discursive models of affect and identification that effect connections across gender, race, and class boundaries” (6). Dobson proposes a broader understanding of sentimental literature as a form of writing that “is premised on an emotional and philosophical ethos that celebrates human connection, both personal and communal, and acknowledges the shared devastation of affectional loss. It is not a discrete literary category . . . but rather an imaginative orientation characterized by certain themes, stylistic features, and figurative conventions” (266).

While the development of the individual and the self-in-society have long been recognized as significant (masculinized) themes of American literature, Dobson contends that sentimental literature values and operates within a different social structure. Instead, sentimental literature “envisions the self-in-relation; family (not necessarily in the conventional biological sense), intimacy, community, and social responsibility are its primary relational modes” (267). In her reading, the core of the sentimental text “is the desire for bonding, and it is affiliation on the plane of emotion, sympathy, nurturance, or similar moral or spiritual inclination for which sentimental writers and readers yearn.” Whereas traditional texts derive their tension from the possibility that individuality, freedom, and independent selfhood are threatened, the tensions of

sentimental texts are created through the “[v]iolation, actual or threatened, of the affectional bond” which “leads to bleak, dispirited, anguished, sometimes outraged, representations of human loss, as well as to idealized portrayals of human connection or divine consolation.”

One of the many contemporary criticisms levied against sentimental literature is that it is, plain and simply, “bad” writing. As Ann Douglas infamously asserted, “[t]he test which distinguishes romanticism from sentimentalism is that its language, its rhetoric, no matter how strained or foreign to modern ears, has not—to use Hemingway’s phrase—‘gone bad’; language, like that of the sentimentalists, which has utterly capitulated to the drift of its times invariably ‘goes bad’” (308). Because sentimental literature so heavily prioritizes affectional bonds and social affiliation, Dobson points out that the language and idiom used in the texts were developed to emphasize emotional connections and to make the experiences of the text accessible to all readers. Sentimental literature relied upon idiom that is “designed to elicit feelings of empathy and concern, and whose language, like the language of realism, is intended to communicate meaning with minimal impediment” (268). The language is not so much “bad” as it is simple, conventional, and understandable for a general audience: “An emphasis on accessible language, a clear prose style, and familiar lyric and narrative patterns defines an aesthetic whose primary quality of transparency is generated by a valorization of connection, an impulse toward communication with as wide an audience as possible.” Such writing comes under heavy criticism by modern standards because it does not meet the literary values of twentieth-century modernists, New Critics, or scholars influenced by them, who privilege sound and structure over accessibility. Rather than exploring the limits of language or conveying literary skill, when meaning becomes disrupted in sentimental literature, it is generally a signal to the reader that something important is happening or that an emotional disruption has occurred.

Thus, sentimental literature can be identified by its use of “conventional subjects, themes, characterization modes, narrative and lyric patterns, tropes, tonal qualities, and linguistic patterns focused around relational experience and the consequences of its rupture” (Dobson, “Reclaiming” 268). Sentimental literature deliberately employs the familiar, using simple and clear language to convey ideas while also drawing upon recognizable themes in order to make use of the social and cultural resonance an author expects a particular trope to hold for the reader. Rather than merely recycling flat, melodramatic imagery and speaking in simplistic terms, sentimental writers incorporate images and ideas that already possess deep cultural meaning for their audiences. In 1985, Tompkins worked to counter beliefs that sentimental writing was bad and unoriginal because it relied on stereotype and repeated the same themes in every work so that critics accused it of creating caricature. In the introduction to *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*, she maintains that sentimental literature deliberately uses familiar tropes to tap into “a storehouse of commonly held assumptions, reproducing what is already there in a typical and familiar form” (xvi). Stereotyped characters work in a similar fashion: “rather than constituting a defect in these novels, [it] was what allowed them to operate as instruments of cultural self-definition” and as “a cultural shorthand.” Stereotyped characters—such as Little Eva, Ellen Montgomery, and Gertie Flint, are not meant to be realistic representations of individuals but are instead “the carriers of strong emotional associations. Their familiarity and typicality, rather than making them bankrupt or stale, are the basis of their effectiveness as integers in a social equation.”

In sentimental writing, Dobson argues,

tales of abandoned wives, widows, orphaned children, and separated families; deathbed and graveyard scenes; and fantasies of reunions in heaven are far from being, in their essence, reductive narrative clichés. Rather, they become in the hands of talented writers evocative metaphors for a looming existential threat—the potential devastation of deeply

experienced human connections. In addition, these tropes often serve as vehicles for depictions of all-too-common social tragedies and political outrages stemming from the failure of society to care for the disconnected. (272)

Therefore, familiar patterns of vulnerable women and children, abandonment, deathbed scenes, excessive crying and tears, religious metaphors of Christ-like sacrifice and salvation, and—as Dobson argues—the keepsake tradition, recur in order to capitalize on the cultural power they already possess. The use of such tropes—in some texts, it can be argued, more effectively employed than others—allow for “a vivid symbolic embodiment of the primacy of human connection and the inevitability of human loss” (273).

A Critical Recovery of Nineteenth-Century Sentimentalism

Despite dramatically outselling such male authors as Melville, Hawthorne, and Thoreau who are today revered as literary giants, the sentimental novel was often dismissed by twentieth-century critics as feminine, emotional, overwrought, and ultra religious. Criticism of women’s sentimental writing is not limited to the twentieth-century, as Hawthorne famously commented when he wrote to his publisher in 1855 that “America is now wholly given over to a d—d mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public is occupied by their trash” (qtd. in Person 24). His assessment has often been reiterated as a shorthand appraisal of the vigorous success of women’s sentimental writing. Throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the term “sentimental” became a label for melodramatic, flat representations that were deemed unrealistic, unsophisticated, and un-literary. Furthermore, calling a work “sentimental” was also a way to judge it negatively as feminine—whether written by a woman or a man—because of its association with emotion and other woman-linked themes such as domesticity or religion. Thus, in broad strokes, critics dismissed both sentimental writing and

feminized writing as non-literary and unsophisticated.

Perhaps the pinnacle of twentieth-century anti-sentimental arguments occurred with the publication of Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture* in 1977. Although one of the first critical works to take sentimental fiction seriously, Douglas sees sentimental culture and fiction as failures because they promote passive, domesticated Christian virtues that flatter women into accepting less powerful social roles within newly forming urban capitalistic societies dominated by men. Reading American history through the lens of Unitarian and Calvinistic theological debate as well as emerging forms of political and capital culture from 1820-1875, Douglas argues that women's increasing participation in and influence upon the church diminished the status of the ministry as a profession: the clergy had become feminized by association with women, and therefore, less powerful in society. Rapid industrial growth resulted in rigidly defined social roles for middle class, urban, Protestant women that emphasized domesticity and motherhood. Essentially, Douglas contends that the swiftly changing industrial landscape allowed men to seize control of new political and economic opportunities, ceding control of religion, domesticity, and sensibility to women and the clergy, two sectors of society which were considered less important.

Douglas, therefore, argues that sentimentalism glorifies this new social and economic order, reveling in religion, domesticity, and sensibility, but failing to observe the ways in which women are limited by these roles and that the feminization of these arenas is a form of social diminishment. Douglas asserts that "praise of motherhood could bolster and promote the middle-class woman's biological function as tantamount, if not superior, to her lost economic productivity; imprison her within her body by glorifying its unique capacities" (74). By relegating women to the home, their primary production would be reproduction, and their only

achievements domestic and religious. Sentimentalism's triumph, according to Douglas, is that women disengage from masculine arenas of social thought and withdraw from political discourse: "sentimentalism might be defined as the political sense obfuscated, or gone rancid" (254). Sentimental literature had, according to Douglas, a "complicated obsession with mediocrity" (168).

However, in 1985 both Jane Tompkins and Philip Fisher began re-visioning sentimentalism, arguing that such novels exerted more social power and philosophical reasoning than earlier critics recognized. Although Douglas had begun treating sentimental culture and literature as a serious subject, she offered only a negative assessment in which she saw women's submission, complicity, and withdrawal from the centers of political, economic, and cultural power in America. Tompkins countered Douglas, pointing out that her stance "toward the vast quantity of literature written by women between 1820 and 1870 is the one that the male-dominated tradition has always expressed—contempt" (217). In contrast, Tompkins and Fisher see active and potentially radical engagement in sentimental texts. By denigrating the value of domesticity and sensibility, Douglas, according to late twentieth-century feminist critics, participates in an ongoing devaluation of the feminine and ignores the real ways that sentimentalism's emphasis on domestic and religious principles was a method for nineteenth-century women's making inroads to cultural and social authority previously denied women altogether. In *Sensational Designs*, Tompkins launched what Laura Wexler and other critics have referred to as "the Douglas-Tompkins debate" (Wexler 9). Acknowledging Douglas's contributions to the study of sentimentalism as well as her limitations, Tompkins writes that she "is the foremost of the feminist critics who have accepted this characterization of the sentimental writers, and it is to her formulation of the anti-sentimentalist position . . . that my arguments

throughout are principally addressed” (217).

Because women’s writing and the sentimental novel had been judged against a “critical perspective that sees them as attempts to achieve a timeless, universal ideal of truth and formal coherence” shaped by a largely masculine, modernist and New Critical tradition, Tompkins sought to re-evaluate sentimental texts “doing work, expressing and shaping the social context that produced them” (200). Only by placing works that have traditionally been dismissed and belittled as poorly written, frivolous, or feminine—as sentimental novels usually were—in their historical contexts can we understand their enormous popular appeal and cultural impact. Tompkins finds that the characters of these novels are types that “operate as a cultural shorthand” and that the characters’ emotional appeal makes these works socially and politically effective (xvi). She argues that sentimental novels rely on emotional appeals to generate sympathy in readers. This sympathy serves a key rhetorical function: engaging reader sympathy allows the text to generate compassion for its subjects and subject matter, so that sentimental scenes and characters promote emotional and moral education for the reader. Sentimental novels, then, attempt to teach readers to “think and act in a particular way” (xi). Such literature “has power in the world” that allows it to connect “with the beliefs and attitudes of large masses of readers so as to impress or move them deeply” (xiv). Thus, the function of the events and scenarios in the texts are “heuristic and didactic rather than mimetic, they do not attempt to transcribe in detail a parabola of events as they ‘actually happen’ in society; rather, they provide a basis for remaking the social and political order in which events take place” (xvii).

Fisher also sees literature as doing cultural work. He argues in *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* that, rather than merely depicting or reflecting reality, nineteenth-century authors were casting the symbolic details, characters, morals, and ideas of their historical

moments, and that “later representations drew on the history that [they] made symbolically concrete” (6). The sentimental novel was often dismissed for its popularity, but that is precisely what Fisher argues is its power:

Popular forms like the sentimental novel and the historical novel soothed by means of the familiar, it was claimed, and ultimately they dulled the sensibilities that art made lively by means of its ‘advanced’ and innovative configurations. But when we look back candidly we can see that often the popular forms, while stale in detail and texture, were massing small patterns of feeling in entirely new directions. (19)

Thus, fiction accomplishes a cultural transformation by which “the unimaginable becomes, finally, the obvious” (8). The use of popular appeal and emotional identification effects such a deep-rooted cultural identification with the emotional narrative that when a sentimental novel such as Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* “installs new habits of moral perception, such as the recognition that a child is a person, a black is a person, it accomplishes, as a last step, the forgetting of its own strenuous work so that what are newly learned habits are only remembered as facts” (4).

Fisher and Tompkins were followed by a number of critics—among them Cathy N. Davidson and Shirley C. Samuels—who continued the critical reevaluation of the ways in which sentimentalism operated in nineteenth century culture and writing. Cathy N. Davidson’s *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (1986), includes a chapter on Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797) in which she analyzes sentimental fiction’s “sociology” and how it represents the way sentimental fiction works through the politics of feme covert (also known as coverture), the social and political practice by which women were rendered legally invisible, considered to be under the protection, guidance, and control of their fathers and eventual husbands. Not only does sentimental fiction illustrate in print the lives of women who had previously lacked a public form of representation, but the fictions revealed

social problems such women experienced under the conditions of female covert while also suggesting potential remedies. Rather than “the frothy fictions that we commonly take them to be,” sentimental fictions thematized “the necessity of informed choice, these fictions championed the cause of female education that they typically proclaimed in their prefaces” and “evinced . . . a solid social realism that also constitutes a critique (even if sometimes covert) of the patriarchal structure of that society” (123). By focusing on women’s marriage choices and consequences, sentimental fiction explored “the range of ideological assessments of the family and the implications for women of different visions of what the family should be” (125). Davidson argues that, rather than the escapist, emotional claptrap of which sentimental fiction is accused of being by some modern critics, it portrays “the legal, social, and political status of the average female reader” of its time, setting forth “the sad truths of many women’s lives . . . more tellingly than did the overtly reformist novels” (128).

Far from simply indulging in self-pity or advising women to submit to their powerless lot, Davidson maintains that sentimental fiction advocated for women’s choices, however restricted those choices might be, as well as education, even in the most conservative tales. Many sentimental fictions admirably portrayed characters who made good decisions because they were well-prepared to do so by education, moral character, and religious background. Even conservative fictions that demonstrated tragic outcomes advocated for women’s choice and education because they revealed the desperate circumstances to which a woman could be brought without them, particularly when male protectors failed to be an ideal—or even a marginally decent—provider and protector. “The concomitant unstated premise of sentimental fiction,” Davidson asserts, “is that the woman must take greater control of her life and must make shrewd judgments of the men who come into her life. Implicitly and explicitly, the novels acknowledge

that married life can be bitterly unhappy and encourage women to circumvent disaster by weighing any prospective suitors in the balance of good sense—society’s and her own” (113). Although men have financial and legal power, the fiction overwhelmingly reveals that women must be educated and should be allowed to exercise the right to make choices impacting their own lives. Sentimental plots, rather than serving as escapist fiction, explored important and relevant social matters, “including the preoccupation with extramarital sex and the social and biological consequences of sexual transgressions” (114). The form “mediated between (and fluctuated between) the hopes of a young woman who knew that her future would be largely determined by her marriage and her all-too-well-founded fears as to what her new status might entail—the legal liabilities of the *feme covert*, the threat of abandonment, the physical realities of repetitive pregnancy, and the danger of an early death during childbirth” (122).

In the introduction to her edited collection of essays, *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America* (1992), Samuels argues that sentimentality appears to be a “national project” that pervaded all aspects of American society and national identity and through which the culture collectively imagined “the nation’s bodies and the national body” (3). Samuels counters criticisms that judge sentimentalists for their inability to effect social change—such as the quick abolition of slavery—by observing that the growing separation of work and home both took power away from the domestic sphere and increased the significance of that space: “a separation from the world of ‘work’ (and economic power) was compensated for by the affective power of the ‘home’; in the case of sentimentality, separation from political action nonetheless meant presenting an affective alternative that not only gave political actions their emotional significance, but beyond that, intimately linked individual bodies to the national body” (4). Working as a set of rules for how to “feel right,”

sentimentality “is literally at the heart of nineteenth-century American culture,” Samuels argues (5, 4). It is “a set of cultural practices designed to evoke a certain form of emotional response, usually empathy, in the reader or viewer” that enables it to produce or reproduce “spectacles that cross race, class, and gender boundaries” (4). Thus, Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* can convince readers to empathize with the separations and trials of the slaves in order to argue against slavery while Fern’s *Ruth Hall* witnesses the sexual politics and structures of male authority that inhibit women as it argues for women as cultural consumers and participants.

Once sentimentalism and the sentimental novel were re-established as legitimate fields of scholarly inquiry, numerous critics began to consider sentimentalism’s cultural context and impact in the nineteenth century. Literary and cultural studies scholars took up the debate, studying sentimentalism in fiction, nonfiction, poetry, slave narratives, art, and rhetoric. Subsequent researchers examined sentimentalism in nineteenth-century family formation, social mores, religious beliefs, legal discourse, domestic economies, racial identity, and gender roles. Gillian Brown’s *Domestic Individualism* (1990), Elizabeth Barnes’s *States of Sympathy* (1997), Julia Stern’s *The Plight of Feeling* (1997), Julie Ellison’s *Cato’s Tears* (1999), Lori Merish’s *Sentimental Materialism* (2000), Paula Bennett’s *Poets in the Public Sphere* (2003), and Laurent Berlant’s *Female Complaint* (2008) are among the numerous works that expand and extend the debates begun by Douglas and Tompkins.

Sentimentalism and the Domestic

As scholars have worked to re-legitimize sentimental literature as a field of study and rescue it from the gender bias that—they have argued—is largely at the base of critical prejudice against women’s writing and popular forms, many have avoided using the term “sentimental”

because of its unfavorable associations and focused instead upon the writing's "domestic" qualities. Davidson acknowledges that the "adjective carries, in contemporary discourse, a heavy load of negative connotations and suggests self-indulgent fantasies bearing little relationship to real life" (122). Baym, in the preface to her 1993 second edition of *Women's Fiction*, writes that in her earlier edition she "tried to avoid the term *sentimental*, which struck [her] in 1978 as so negatively connotative that to use it would be to lose in advance any case for finding woman's fiction at all interesting" (xxix). In their attempts to reclaim nineteenth-century sentimental texts, many feminist scholars have tended to conflate sentimental literature with domestic literature. Associating women's writing with the domestic literature described by Nancy Armstrong not only allows scholars to avoid the scorn and derision inherent in the term "sentimental," it also enables them to point out the ways this writing claims feminist power through creation and control of the private space of the home. It provides an alternate model of evaluating literature to modernist and New Critical methods that insist on ignoring cultural context. Many significant studies of sentimental literature, therefore, focus upon its domestic qualities, treating sentimental and domestic literature as the same.

Although recent scholarship on nineteenth-century domestic fiction and sentimental literature often conflates the two genres, treating them interchangeably, critical understandings of the domestic novel acknowledge that it was influenced by the Culture of Sentiment and eighteenth-century philosophies of sensibility or sentimentality. While domestic novels are generally sentimental, the sentimental genre is an older form, dating back to the eighteenth century, and is not necessarily domestic. I am arguing that today's critics must understand the different rhetorical agendas of the two modes and resist automatically conflating them. While proletarian novels written by women revise the domestic novel, not all of them can be considered

sentimental. Although they take the home and hearth as their subject in addition to focusing on female protagonists, many do not incorporate recognized sentimental tropes nor do they rely on “feeling right” as an instructional method.

Because work on sentimental domesticity has succeeded in re-claiming the sentimental and changing scholarly understandings of the term, new opportunities to interpret sentimental novels beyond their domestic concerns are now available. Sentimentalism should no longer be considered a dirty word, and although bias against the feminine and against women’s writing lingers, this particular term no longer has the power to cast a pall over a text as minor, insignificant, or unimportant. In this study, I show that while the sentimental and the domestic are linked in the twentieth century, not all sentimental writing is, in fact, domestic literature. Connotations of the emotional, private, and domestic as “feminine” have continued to inform our interpretations of sentimentalism; twentieth-century writings both confirm and challenge those interpretations.

Redefining the Family

After Tompkins and Fisher established that sentimental novels “do cultural work,” scholars who examine sentimentalism explore exactly what type of work that fiction is intended to do. One of the major aspects of the sentimental mode that will remain significant to a study of sentimentalism in the twentieth century is the way in which these texts redefine familial structures. Cindy Weinstein, in *Family, Kinship, and Sympathy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2004), analyzes the models of sympathy demonstrated in a wide variety of sentimental fiction. She argues that the central project of all sentimental novels is the “making of a family” but that this construction is based on “an institution to which one can choose to belong

or not” (8). Rather than defining families based on biology (or, to use Weinstein’s term, consanguinity), sentimental novels emphasize affection and adoption in the re-formation of the American family. Orphans and vulnerable children or women move through difficulties in each novel, during which they form sympathetic kinship groups with new friends and adoptive families. These groups represent the ideal, sentimental family based on choice and affection, rather than biology or economic obligation. Thus, Weinstein asserts, a “widespread cultural examination of the family is being conducted in a variety of antebellum realms, including the field of domestic relations, the debate over slavery, and the many utopian efforts to reform the family.”

Although many critics have credited the sentimental novel with producing the contemporary middle-class family structure, Weinstein argues that many sentimental texts “fiercely challenge the patriarchal regime of the biological family by calling attention to the frequency with which fathers neglect the economic as well as emotional obligations owed to their children” (8-9). To make up for paternal failure, sentimental texts and advice manuals “advance a theory of mother love,” but most sentimental plots require the child to be motherless (9). Thus, the sentimental novel must expand, through sympathy, the possibilities for who counts as family: “the criterion by which families are deemed capable (or not) to raise a child shifts from considerations of economy to those of affection. Sentimental fictions are about finding the right place where sympathy flourishes and understanding that place and those people as one’s home and ‘family.’” As Weinstein draws it, “[t]o extend the meaning of family is to extend the possibilities for sympathy.”

Building upon Weinstein’s argument, Carol J. Singley proposes that adoption—one method by which families are legally and officially expanded—is a significant social

construction in sentimental texts. In *Adopting America: Childhood, Kinship, and National Identity in Literature* (2011), Singley argues that adoption both redefines the family and reaffirms its importance as a social unit because “adoption may be represented openly as an alternative to biological kinship, or it may be designed as an elaborate fiction that replicates the biologically intact family structure it replaces” (6). The adoption plot in nineteenth-century fiction “tells the story of an aspiring Anglo-American middle class *and* the underclass it leaves behind, and is associated with moral reform” because it reveals the ways in which women and children can be thrown into poverty and questions who is responsible for raising them back out of it (8). The project of redefining the family, according to Singley, occurs on both an individual and a national level, as adoption narratives promote idealized families based on affection while undergirding an ambivalent class attitude that maintained a patronizing attitude toward the poor: “Literary adoption addresses a collective need for improvement, assuages social guilt over inequality, and shows that disparate elements of society can be assimilated without altering the fundamental composition of society itself.” Thus, the sentimental novel, with its frequent use of the adoption plot, fostered “a new republican conception of the family as a nonhierarchical group of individuals whose will to be together is at least important as blood ties” while also creating the foundation of the emerging middle-class (83).

Sentimental Themes & Tropes

Sentimental texts define primary identities through an individual’s relationship to others—the self-in-relation to family, community, and society—and the narrative tensions that occur within them stem from the possibility that the bonds of affection may be severed and that human loss may occur. Particular images, themes, and tropes in the nineteenth-century recur in

sentimental texts because they demonstrate the ways in which these identity-forming relationships are developed and the depth to which they affect an individual. Sentimental texts also illustrate the ways those relationships are threatened due to various causes, whether a protagonist makes poor choices or is subject to forces that render her vulnerable to abuse and abandonment. As Tompkins has pointed out, tropes that recur in sentimental texts such as vulnerable women, orphaned children, abandonment, deathbed scenes, excessive crying and tears, and religious metaphors of Christ-like sacrifice and salvation, operate as a cultural shorthand within the texts. These images commonly circulated in the nineteenth-century and represent iterations of social, gender, race, and class ideals that sentimental texts repeatedly put under stress, revealing the various ways those standards do or do not reflect women's actual life experiences. Using this cultural shorthand allows sentimental texts to capture reader sympathy because of their identification with the familiar images and themes. It also enables the texts to show the ways in which they disrupt the tropes, drawing attention to failures in ideals or instructing readers to pay attention to the variations they have imposed upon the familiar images.

Although sentimentalism is derived from eighteenth-century principles of sensibility, which emphasize common feeling, charity, and emotional sensitivity, by the mid-nineteenth century, it also had become associated with what is known as the "Cult of True Womanhood." Barbara Welter outlines the basic principles of this ideology as requiring that True Women possess: 1) religious piety, 2) sexual purity, 3) submission to male authority, and 4) domesticity, so that a woman's place is in the home as a caregiving sister, daughter, or wife (152). In sentimental literature, women were frequently idealized as models who exemplify these desirable traits or as objects of sympathy who teach other women to avoid tragic mistakes by striving to embody those four important principles. Plots place women in positions of vulnerability and

temptation, and characters demonstrate the results of what happens to women who either embraced or denied these qualities, teaching the lessons of True Womanhood through the outcomes of the fictional characters. Davidson would argue, however, that because the female characters are placed in positions of tragedy with which their female readers can sympathize, many of these novels also taught that women were subject to limited options based upon their roles as women, often illustrating the very need for reform and equality suggested by later sentimental literature that conservative fiction—which overtly endorsed principles of submission and domesticity—sought to oppose.

The trope of the vulnerable woman is fundamental to sentimental literature. Tompkins characterizes the sentimental novel as a genre written “by, for, and about women” (125). However, the protagonists of these stories are not merely women who are born into luxury and success, enjoy the fruits of their status, and moralize to their audiences from a position of security. It is necessary to the plot, the moral imperative, and the reader’s sympathetic response that the women in these texts experience a tragic reversal of fortune or discover that they are not, in fact, protected by their social status or the fathers and husbands who are legally and socially responsible for them. Sentimental literature requires women to be at risk in order to provide narrative tension and opportunities for the protagonist’s moral growth. Her vulnerability also reveals that the largest tragedy of all is a loss of affection or separation from loved ones and allows authors to critique a system that idealizes female protection and limitation while simultaneously placing women at risk of abuse and exploitation when they lack education and choice or are placed under the control of men who mistreat them.

Vulnerability in women can appear as the risk of sexual transgression, the result of which is not only social disgrace but a loss of wealth and often death. Sexual purity is an important

theme in sentimental literature insofar as it teaches young women of the dangers of giving in to temptation—becoming a “fallen woman”—and that their most desirable goal is to become safely wed to a husband of good moral character and emotional compatibility. By presenting ways in which women become socially vulnerable as well as the temptations to which they may fall, sentimental plots analyze “[i]mportant social matters . . . including the preoccupation with extramarital sex and the social and biological consequences of sexual transgressions” (Davidson 114). Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* became enormously popular in America after its 1794 publication, going through 200 editions.⁵ It is the story of a British schoolgirl’s seduction by a raffish soldier, John Montraville, who drags her to America and abandons her, pregnant and ill. Another early example, Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797), was based upon the highly publicized death of an elite Connecticut woman who gave birth to a stillborn, illegitimate child at a roadside tavern. The bestselling epistolary novel focuses upon the circumstances that led to the downfall of a well-educated and socially prominent woman, warning readers about her poor choices and tragic outcome but also, as Davidson points out, “set[ting] forth a remarkably detailed assessment of the marital possibilities facing late eighteenth-century women of the middle or upper-middle-classes” (144).

As domestic novelists embraced the belief that “heroines should never fall” and should instead have the power to resist and to reform the rakes that tempt them, the fallen woman became an underground figure associated with the dangers of urbanization and public life (Wyman 168). While sentimental novelists focused on virtuous heroines, fallen women began to appear in salacious, underground mid-century “city literature.” But images of the sexual sinner re-emerged in post-Civil War sentimental fiction where novelists offered more sympathetic

⁵ *Charlotte Temple* was first published in England in 1791 under the title *Charlotte, A Tale of Truth*. The first American edition was published in 1794.

depictions of women who committed and suffered from sexual transgressions. After the 1860s, “[g]ently reared heroines no longer succumbed in novel after novel,” but fallen women were most likely poor, country girls who fell prey to prostitution and vice in the big city.

Demonstrating sympathy for the fallen and interest in their rehabilitation allowed authors to examine the economic and social dangers that force women into such precarious positions.

Another way of presenting women as vulnerable is to cast heroines as heiresses who have lost fortunes—many novels after the Panic of 1837 focused on the daughters of families who had lost economic investments as well as their homes and social status—while others also frequently appeared as those who have lost their legal or social protectors. Ruth Hall, in the novel that bears her name, is blissfully happy during her marriage to Harry, while she cares for her husband and their three children. Ruth, however, becomes vulnerable when her husband dies of an illness. Upon Harry’s death, Ruth loses financial support for herself and her children as well as legal protection. Ruth cannot turn to her own family—her former supporters—for help: her mother is dead, and her father is more interested in protecting his own interests, hoping to pass off the care of Ruth’s family onto her in-laws. Her in-laws, with whom she has never been on good terms, dislike Ruth and hope to take the children away by blackmailing her with their care (i.e., they will take the children in but refuse to allow the mother to come with them). Thus, Ruth is left with no financial resources. Nor does she have the traditional familial forms of protection women expect, forcing (or enabling) her to take the unusual step of pursuing a public, literary career.

Similarly, Stowe draws a parallel between the vulnerable, white, middle-class women of sentimental novels and vulnerable enslaved women, primarily through her character Eliza in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. She, as well as other enslaved women in the novel, demonstrates an even

more extreme form of vulnerability, lacking any socially or legally recognized protectors. By valuing the affectional bonds of love for her husband and child, Eliza must acknowledge and work against the ways in which she has been placed in an untenable social position, allowing Stowe's contemporary readers to draw parallels with their own lives. Jacobs, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), reveals an even stronger alignment with and critique of vulnerable sentimental women, showing the ways in which Linda Brent is subject to sexual abuse by Dr. Flint and must enter into a non-marital sexual relationship to shield herself from his further exploitation. Linda's years of hiding in an attic room, in order to fool Dr. Flint into believing she has escaped North and to protect her children from being "broken" as field hands, illustrates both Linda's vulnerability and her very limited set of choices, all of which serve to constrain her and her family even as they allow her to avoid particularly horrific options.

Other forms of the vulnerable woman emerge through the trope of the orphaned child. While some heroines are actual orphans, other times a protagonist "only thinks herself to be one, or has by necessity been separated from her parents for an indefinite time" (Baym, "Introduction" 35). This form of vulnerability highlights the breakdown of a system in which a woman is assumed to be protected by her family. Ellen Montgomery becomes a de facto orphan in *The Wide, Wide World* when she is parted from her mother, who is ordered to join Mr. Montgomery in Europe for health reasons. Her aunt turns out to be a harsh and unloving guardian, but Ellen finds a number of kind role models who step in to comfort her. She discovers the love and guidance of a family through her friendship with the Humphreys. Ellen is accepted into the fold of this loving Christian family, but her friendships with Alice and John, in particular, are instrumental in shaping her into the moral woman she becomes. Alice is both a sisterly and maternal figure, while John fills the roles of brother and father (the end of the novel

implies that he will also become her husband).

Gertrude Flint in *The Lamplighter*, meanwhile, is an actual orphan, abandoned at her mother's death to the care of Nan Gant, a physically abusive and reluctant guardian. She is rescued and adopted by Trueman Flint, who becomes a loving surrogate father. Gertrude builds a de facto family through her friendships. Emily Graham is both a sisterly and maternal figure, and Gertrude becomes an informal ward to her family after Flint's death. Although Gertrude's loyalty to and love for all of her friends—as well as her independent spirit—cause her to lose the protection of Emily's father when she leaves his house to care for the sick Mrs. Sullivan, her goodness and love eventually heal the rifts. She is reunited with Emily and eventually Emily's brother, whom she later marries (so that Willie, too, becomes her brother and husband, emphasizing the sentimental theme of emotional parity in marital unions).

Orphans appear frequently in sentimental fiction, ranging from the white, middle-class, paragon of virtue such as Edna Earl in Augusta Jane Evans's *St. Elmo* to Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—the latter an orphan because of slavery's institutional separation of families. Portraying a child as alone in the world circumvents the possibility that her own choices or moral failings could have contributed to her own sorry condition at the outset of the novel (although it does leave room for a potential critique of choices made by her parents or the circumstances that led to her being left defenseless and alone). It also allows a plot's focusing on the development of that child into a moral person by the family she adopts—developed out of networks of chosen kin—and the choices she makes. Furthermore, plots that focus on orphans highlight the ways in which young women must acquire particular qualities or skills to become successful; they advocate for a certain way of being, often revealing the flaws in a cultural system that assumes protection, support, and a home which requires only women's submission and caretaking.

Another trope related to that of the vulnerable woman is abandonment, as women were often made vulnerable by the desertion of those entrusted with their protection. Abandonment may occur through death—as in the case of Ruth Hall—or it may come through the prioritization of needs and responsibilities over that of the individual heroine—as in *The Wide, Wide World* where Ellen is abandoned by her parents, not out of cruelty or neglect, but because her father’s business interests and her mother’s health are considered more important than keeping Ellen with her parents. Typically, women are also abandoned by lovers who promise through word or deed to fill the role of husband and protector, so that readers are cautioned to resist the tempting pledges of men who seek physical gratification but do not enter into social or legal contracts that bind them to a woman as her protector. Charlotte Temple of the novel that bears her name and Eliza Wharton of *The Coquette*, therefore, both find themselves pregnant and alone, abandoned by their lovers. Women in sentimental texts faced multiple forms of abandonment and were urged, through the various tragic outcomes, to avoid placing themselves in such positions or to be prepared to survive the hardships such events create because any individual whose life was dependent on another’s would always be subject to hardship if that other individual failed her.

Although not all sentimental literature meditated on religious themes, Christ-like sacrifice and religious devotion are other common elements of sentimental literature’s ability to seize the authority to designate individuals as worthy of cultural recognition and to generate sympathy among readers. Viewed as the “core of woman’s virtue, the source of her strength,” commitment to Protestant principles not only enhanced a woman’s goodness and her power as a moral guide but also brought meaning to her suffering (Welter 152). Despite Leslie Fiedler’s critical view of sentimental fiction in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, he notes that such novels engage in a contemporary theological debate by modeling a particular form of female religiosity,

challenging “the fundamental Calvinist belief in natural depravity; for it teaches that women, women in general and some women in particular, are absolutely pure; and that their merely human purity can do Christ’s work in the world: redeem corrupted souls from sin” (80).

Jane Tompkins connects the ability of the sentimental novel to create sympathy in the reader with a cultural understanding that is primarily organized through religion:

The power of a sentimental novel to move its audience depends upon the audience’s being in possession of the conceptual categories that constitute character and event. That storehouse of assumptions includes attitudes toward the family and toward social institutions; a definition of power and its relation to individual human feeling; notions of political and social equality; and above all, a set of religious beliefs that organizes and sustains the rest. (127)

Religious education has been a central theme in many nineteenth-century sentimental texts. For example, in *The Wide, Wide World* Ellen Montgomery struggles to learn to love God and live a Christian life in the face of adversity, and, in *The Lamplighter*, Gertrude’s rescue from orphanhood by Trueman Flint—a Pilgrim’s Progress-style name—and subsequent religious education results in her virtuous nature. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe retells “the story of the crucifixion—in terms of the nation’s greatest political conflict—slavery—and of its most cherished social beliefs—the sanctity of motherhood and the family” (Tompkins 134). In nineteenth-century sentimental novels, Christianity is seen as an instructive, morally improving force that guides individuals toward virtue, so reading about individuals who struggle with adversity and with religion itself is also morally instructive: “As the religious stereotypes of ‘Sunday-school fiction’ define and organize the elements of social and political life, so the ‘melodrama’ and ‘pathos’ associated with the underlying myth of crucifixion put the reader’s heart in the right place with respect to the problems the narrative defines” (135).

During the journey to her aunt’s house, Ellen Montgomery, in *The Wide, Wide World*, meets a kind man who teaches her about Christianity, and she resolves to be a good Christian.

Her aunt turns out to be unkind, so Ellen takes solace in friendship with Alice Humphreys, the daughter of a local minister. Alice teaches Ellen Christian morals, encouraging her to forgive her aunt and guiding her in the spiritual principles of good womanhood. Physically delicate throughout the novel, Alice eventually succumbs to illness, but the legacy of her instructions and her principled manners enable Ellen to grow into a moral woman. In *The Lamplighter*, the orphaned and abused Gertrude Flint befriends blind Emily Graham, who teaches her to love God and to dedicate herself to Christian virtues. Although Gertrude maintains her sense of spirit, it is tempered by her religious dedication. She is rewarded for her suffering and her goodness with marriage to a childhood friend.

In such texts, young, vulnerable women are rescued from temptation and corruption by female models of religious piety who teach them to embrace Christian moral principles. The lesson of the texts is not only that God and good virtue are required for any True Woman, but that religious conversion enacts social reform by altering individual and group behavior. Such conversion, in fact, is the basis for social change, because Christianity is the fundamental organizing structure for nineteenth-century society and the social structure to which women had increasing access. It was this view upon which Stowe drew to rewrite the story of American slavery: “The notion that historical change takes place only through religious conversion, which is a theory of power as old as Christianity itself, is dramatized and vindicated in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by the novel's insistence that all human events are organized, clarified, and made meaningful by the existence of spiritual realities this novel does not simply quote the Bible, it rewrites the Bible as the story of a Negro slave” (Tompkins 133-34). Little Eva's innocence and purity enables her to model a (tearfully protracted) Christ-like death, through which she inspires Topsy's conversion from sinner to Christian and Miss Ophelia's (as well as the reader's)

perception of her as slave to vulnerable child. “By giving Topsy her love,” Tompkins argues, “Eva initiates a process of redemption whose power, transmitted from heart to heart, can change the entire world” (131).

Protestant Christianity, in sentimental works, also at times enables women to stand at odds with national law or cultural mores, allowing them to justify defiance through their adherence to religious virtue, the result of which promotes social change. By appealing to a “higher power” and the divine honor justified by God and Christ, such women as Fern’s Ruth Hall can defy the disapproval of relatives and the gendered rules of middle-class society in order to seek economic independence as a newspaper writer. Similarly, in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Mrs. Bird disagrees with her husband, a senator who has voted in favor of the Fugitive Slave Law, and asserts that “I don’t know anything about politics, but I have read my Bible” (69). Stowe takes a religious stance as an author and reformer, invoking God in her assault on the institution of slavery and closing the novel with a strong rebuke: “Both North and South have been guilty before God; and the Christian Church has a heavy account to answer . . . for, not surer is the eternal law by which the millstone sinks in the ocean, than that stronger law by which injustice and cruelty shall bring on nations the wrath of Almighty God!” (388).

Sentimental emphasis on domesticity—that a woman’s proper place is in the home as a daughter, wife, and, eventually, mother—is linked to the other branches of True Womanhood’s philosophical tenets. Involvement in religion was believed to lead women toward the home rather than away from it; good wives and mothers were expected to model Christian virtues for their families, and women who embraced Christian principles also embraced the Divine order that placed husbands at the heads of families. Because husbands and fathers were the ordained head of households, they were viewed as protectors and providers. However, as Davidson points

out, laws of feme covert meant that this idealized view was also based in a practical reality: “after marriage, [a woman] became, for all practical purposes, totally dependent upon her husband. Her rights would be ‘covered’ by his, and it was his legal and social prerogative to define what those rights would be” (113). Sentimental philosophy posits that a father or husband serves as a financial provider who furnishes a comfortable home and the resources required to meet bodily needs. As its moral and emotional center, in fact, a woman is in charge of determining the most efficient allocation of those resources.

A woman’s responsibility is to run an organized and clean household—one which serves as a reflection of her noble guidance—which means effectively managing her husband’s resources so that they provide ample and appropriate food and clothing for its members, as well as clean furnishings that are arranged to promote health and comfort. Numerous periodicals of the time published essays on housekeeping and home management. Domestic manuals, etiquette books, and cookbooks rose in popularity. By 1860, monthly *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, edited by Sarah J. Hale, rose in circulation to 150,000 subscribers. Alongside fiction, poetry, fashion plates, and sentimental songs, *Godey’s* published recipes, housekeeping tips, and essays on home management. In 1841, Stowe’s sister, Catherine Beecher, published *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, and Stowe later collaborated with her upon the revision that was published as *The American Woman’s Home* in 1869. The appearance of these household manuals brackets the publication of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as well as a series of articles she wrote during the 1860s for *The Atlantic Monthly* in which her writing appeared under the pseudonym “Christopher Crowfield” in a monthly “House & Home” column. The articles are written from the perspective of a “frank, open-hearted” husband who relates the domestic follies, plans, and triumphs of his wife and daughters. Stowe and her sister “proposed nothing less than a rational,

simplified, and democratic household” (Fisher 87). In nonfiction and fiction, Stowe emphasizes that “the style of household management was at the center of moral order for New England: neatness, parsimony, the daily round of tasks were themselves a key element of moral uprightness The New England virtues grew out of the soil of equality, the disdain for servants, and the economy of household self-reliance” (124-25).

Twentieth century scholars argue that the stress upon women’s place in the home led to an increasing ideology of separate spheres, in which the private, domestic sphere of the home was considered the proper place for women (and children), becoming a feminized space. Therefore, the public sphere—that of industry, agriculture, business, politics—was considered the domain of men, a masculinized space. Although modern philosophical concepts of public and private spheres were introduced by Jürgen Habermas⁶ in the 1960s (translated to English in the 1980s), nineteenth-century views of the domestic sphere drew from eighteenth-century beliefs about privacy and the individual. Nancy Armstrong points out that the separation of the private space of the home and the public space of work, as well as its gendered connotations, are related to modern formations of identity and culture as well as the ways in which fiction—particularly women’s writing—helped these concepts take shape. Armstrong argues that “modern institutional cultures depend upon the separation of ‘the political’ from ‘the personal’ . . . they produce and maintain this separation on the basis of gender—the formation of masculine and feminine domains of culture” (“Some Call it Fiction” 573). As novels increasingly represented the space of the home, it “helped to formulate the ordered space we now recognize as the household, that it made that space totally functional and used it as the context for representing

⁶ Habermas argues that the public sphere emerged in the 18th century in Europe as a space of open critical discussion where private individuals came together to form a public whose “public reason” would work as a check on state power. Prior to the 18th century, European culture had been dominated by a “representational” culture, where one party sought to “represent” itself on its audience by overwhelming its subjects. See *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962, trans. 1989).

normal behavior” (580). This normality became an important context in nineteenth century women’s writing: the space of the home was the standard backdrop for sentimental texts. It was, after all, the space where the majority of middle-class women spent their time, as they were excluded from many forms of public life. Although many women were active outside the home, the space of the home became the common representation of the normal and the ideal of sentimental fiction.

Although modern critics have objected to the presence of heavily dramatized, tearfully rendered death scenes for their perceived ineffectual melodrama, such episodes are a common feature in these novels and do a particular kind of rhetorical work. The portrayal of mourning and loss develops a compassionate connection with readers who, particularly in the nineteenth century, were likely to have experienced the death of a family member and can sympathize with the process of grief experienced by the characters. As Fisher observes, “[t]he most extreme form of parting is death, and deathbed scenes play a key role in the sentimental narrative. They are its primary image of domestic suffering. The reader of sentimental fiction participates in its moral purposes by accepting analogies between his own experiences of suffering and those of characters within the novel” (109).

“The power of the dead or the dying to redeem the unregenerate is a major theme of nineteenth-century popular fiction and religious literature,” Tompkins argues, while “[m]others and children are thought to be uniquely capable of this work” (128). Because “[d]eathbed scenes are experienced from the point of view of the survivors, not the phenomenal point of view of the one dying. Their subject is loss, not death” (Fisher 109). This loss is morally instructive: imparting lessons about the consequence of poor choices, modeling Christ-like suffering and sacrifice, and showing the cruelties of a social system that would deliberately cause suffering to

others. Death is not merely a loss to be mourned, but a moment of spiritual or emotional recognition for surviving characters (and by extension the reader). Therefore, critics argue, death in the sentimental novel is not so passive or self-indulgently maudlin as anti-sentimentalists claim, serving instead as a call to action and for social change: “the suffering female child” in death becomes “radically spiritualized,” and “the child's suffering body” operates “as an agent of moral reform” (5).

Eliza Wharton's death in *The Coquette* results from her sexually risqué behavior: she has an unsanctioned sexual relationship that results in pregnancy and death in childbirth. Although the primary moral power of her death serves as a warning against the real-life risks of extramarital sexual activity (and, Davidson would argue, female sexuality in general), it also serves a redemptive function. Eliza ends up in her predicament because she is seduced by Major Peter Sanford, who courts her but marries another and later returns to tempt Eliza into a sexual relationship after she has lost all hope of marrying the man she actually loves. Her death causes Sanford to regret his behavior, feeling himself the “murderer” of Eliza and worrying about the “retribution to come” (238). In a final letter to friend Charles Deighton, Sanford recognizes the depth of his crimes and shows extreme remorse: “If I look back, I recoil with horror from the black catalogue of vices, which I have stained my past life” (239). Closing, Sanford presents a passionate warning to other would-be libertines, writing “Let it warn you, my friend, to shun the dangerous paths which I have trodden, that you may never be involved in the hopeless ignominy and wretchedness of Peter Sanford.”

In *The Wide, Wide World* death is a catalyst for spiritual redemption and a reminder that those who are parted on earth will be reunited in Heaven if they are faithful to Protestant Christian beliefs. The separation of Ellen from her mother is equated to death, and indeed the

parting becomes as permanent as death because they will never see each other again, for Mrs. Montgomery dies while in Europe: “Heart met heart in that agony, for each knew all that was in the other. No,—not quite all. Ellen did not know that the whole of bitterness death had for her mother she was tasting then. But it was true. Death had no more power to give her pain after this parting should be over” (I, 76). The separation is deeply painful to both Ellen and her mother, but it enables Ellen’s literal and spiritual journey. When Ellen later receives news of her mother’s death, she is nearly shattered by her grief. Her friends fear it will cause her own death, but she is saved by turning to the Bible for comfort and by her faithful friends who remind her that her mother “has reached that bright home where there is no more sin, nor sorrow, nor death Nor parting;—and though *we* are parted from them, it is but for a little while” (II, 154). Alice Humphreys, Ellen’s friend, “adopted sister,” and spiritual advisor, is also separated from Ellen when she dies of a protracted illness (likely consumption). Dying peacefully in her sleep, leaving “a ray of brightness on an earthly house,” Alice’s passing serves as a Christ-like example, reminding Ellen that her suffering brings her closer to God (II, 297). As John, Ellen’s friend and future husband reminds her, “[I]et sorrow but bring us closer to Him We must weep because we are left alone; but for her—‘I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord!’” (II, 302).

It is this sympathy through grief that allows Stowe to argue against the cruelties of the slave system in a manner that is emotionally accessible to her readers. Stowe’s primary audience of Northern white, middle-class citizens had no experience with the physical hardships or personal abuses of slavery. They also “had no experience of having a member of his family suddenly sold off to a distant plantation from which he would never return, but the reader did almost certainly undergo traumatic, unexpected separation from someone, often a child, by

death” (Fisher 118-19). Stowe herself attributes an awakening of sympathy for the plight of the slaves to the death of her own eighteen-month-old child in 1849. In a letter to abolitionist Eliza Cabot Follen, Stowe writes, “I have been the mother of seven children, the most beautiful and the most loved of whom lies buried near my Cincinnati residence. It was at his dying bed and at his grave that I learned what a poor slave mother may feel when her child is torn away from her” (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* 413). In dramatizing the death of Little Eva “the only child, the center of a family’s life,” Stowe creates an “experiential equation . . . by means of which the reader can cross over to the inner world of the slave family in which, without warning, a member disappears never to return” (Fisher 119).

Death is integral to many sentimental texts’ religious structure, emphasizing that a separation in life “will be mended only by a later reunion in the after-life” (109). Such a parting must be final and impossible to overcome so that only faithfulness to Christian doctrine can enable a reunion: one must be redeemed by God in order to achieve salvation and be reunited in heaven. Death scenes and the mourning that follows dramatize the pain of such losses, eliciting sympathy from readers who understand the depths of such grief themselves. However, they also offer a solution to grief through religious salvation, thereby teaching readers to accept the way in which the novel structures the world. The text, therefore, brings together the spiritual and social worlds, extending principles of Christ-like love, sacrifice, and sympathy to other aspects of society. Therefore, merely indulging in sadness and grief is a threat to the physical and spiritual body of the individual; these texts insist on an outward projection of suffering, one that brings redemption and reform to the individual, which the individual then carries outward into the world in the form of social change. Dying becomes, not just a mournful event, but “a supreme form of heroism . . . the equivalent not of defeat but of victory; it brings an access of power, not

a loss of it . . . enact[ing] a philosophy, as much political as religious, in which the pure and powerless die to save the powerful and corrupt, and thereby show themselves more powerful than those they save” (Tompkins 127-28). Particularly spiritual individuals—those who exemplify Christian morality—serve as inspirational models of how to embrace divine principles on Earth, so their deaths have the power to inspire others to adopt those beliefs and behaviors. Loss and grief has the power to inspire others to embrace salvation and reform social conditions.

While death is a significantly sentimental event, the loss of a child—a loss that is often believed to be experienced more acutely by the mother than any other member of the family—is both particularly tragic and extraordinarily capable of achieving the kind of sympathy that enables the cultural work that sentimental fiction desires. In the Victorian era, the cultural view of children changed from that of earlier centuries—where they were essentially viewed as miniature adults—to vulnerable, innocent beings in need of nurturing and protecting. Children were thought to be pure, uncorrupted souls who are already closer to God’s love but also in need of guidance by mothers who were uniquely capable of providing the domestic care that would instill Christian values and proper social mores. Sentimental texts, which contributed to this perspective on children, also drew great sympathetic force from the death of a child. Because the innocence children were thought to possess mirrored Christ’s purity on Earth, children were thought able to inspire spiritual redemption in others. The loss of a child was deeply tragic, so their deaths often symbolized Christ-like sacrifice, triggering moments of religious awakening: “[w]hen the spiritual power of death is combined with the natural sanctity of childhood, the child becomes an angel endowed with salvific force [m]ost often, it is the moment of death that saves, when the dying child, glimpsing for a moment the glory of heaven, testifies to the reality of the life to come” (Tompkins 129).

The death of Little Eva, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is the epitome of an evocative child who models Christ-like purity and innocence, showing her family the way to heaven and salvation through her life as well as her death. Stowe acknowledges Eva's place in this tradition, writing

Has there ever been a child like Eva? Yes, there have been; but their names are always on grave-stones, and their sweet smiles, their heavenly eyes, their singular words and ways, are among the buried treasures of yearning hearts It is as if heaven had an especial band of angels, whose office it was to sojourn for a season here, and endear them the wayward human heart, that they might bear it upward with them in their homeward flight. When you see that deep, spiritual light in the eye,—when the little soul reveals itself in words sweeter and wiser than the ordinary words of children,—hope not to retain that child; for the seal of heaven is on it, and the light of immortality looks out from its eyes. (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 228)

Such children are not meant to stay on earth, for their power is not just in their lives but also in their deaths. Like Christ, they must die to point the way for others. Prior to falling ill, Eva is the image of pious Christ-like goodness: Tom “loved her as something frail and earthly, yet almost worshipped her as something heavenly and divine” (224). She loves to read the Bible aloud and describes her dreams of angels and Heaven with Tom, telling him “I’m going *there* . . . to the spirits bright, Tom; I’m *going, before long*” (226). She desires to teach the “servants” (slaves) to read so they may study the Bible, and when Marie objects because “when you come to be dressing and going into company you won’t have time,” Eva has no interest in such material concerns, choosing quietly to give Mammy reading lessons (229). She urges her father to free his slaves because she sympathizes with their sorrows, fearing the families will be separated if something should happen to her father, a reflection of the realities of the slave system as well as foreshadowing St. Clare’s death. Upon her deathbed, Eva—who is beloved by family and servants alike—addresses everyone in a scene punctuated by “bursts of groans, sobs, and lamentations,” urging them to think of their own souls and reminding them that “there is a beautiful world, where Jesus is. I am going there, and you can go there you must not live

idle, careless, and thoughtless lives. You must be Christians. You must remember that each one of you can become angels, and be angels forever” (251).

Eva’s goodness causes all who know her to love her and to love God; therefore, she demonstrates the behavior of a true Christian saint. Her death is a sacrifice that urges others to embrace her belief in the saving force of Jesus so that they can all be reunited in Heaven while also showing that the embrace of these values leads to sympathy for the enslaved and a desire to change existing social conditions. Her power is strong enough to bring everyone to tears, but she also inspires changes in behavior. Topsy—who has previously been wildly unreachable—wishes to embrace God and behave better: “O, Miss Eva, I *is* tryin! . . . but, Lor, it’s so hard to be good!” (252). Eva inspires Miss Ophelia—who has found Topsy an impossible trial—to love her and become a surrogate mother to the orphan child: “Topsy, you poor child,” she said, as she led her into her room, “don’t give up! *I* can love you, though I am not like that dear little child. I hope I’ve learnt something of the love of Christ from her. I can love you; I do, and I’ll try to help you to grow up a good Christian girl” (259). Miss Ophelia comes to view Topsy “through the softened medium that Eva’s hand had first held before her eyes, and saw in her only an immortal creature, whom God had sent to be led by her to glory and virtue” (266-67). Eva’s influence, and the grief over her loss, eventually succeeds in convincing St. Clare to free Tom, but St. Clare is killed before he can follow through with his promise. Thus, Eva’s moral example has the power to enact change, but Stowe’s text reveals the dangers of waiting to embrace such lessons.

Naturally, many of these death scenes result in tearful episodes, an outward, physical expression of grief and sadness. Sentimental novels have become associated with tears and crying, and anti-sentimental critics have viewed tears as another indication of maudlin sensibilities. As Tompkins, Samuels, and others have noted, tears have become the representative

image of the sentimental novel, which has been dismissed at times as “all tears and flapdoodle” or “tears, idle tears” (Tompkins 130; Howells qtd. in Samuels 5). Sharing the frustration of critics who focus on the impotence of crying and see it as emphasizing a feminine passivity in sentimental texts, Fisher argues that tears represent an inability to act: “[w]eeping is a sign of powerlessness. Tears represent the fact that only a witness who cannot effect action will experience suffering as deeply as the victim. For this reason stories of the long ago past play a central part in sentimentality: their only possible response is that of tears rather than revolt” (108). Therefore, “[t]he feeling of suffering becomes more important than action against suffering. Tears become more important than escapes or rescues” (110).

The symbolic use of tears in sentimental texts recalls its origins in the tradition of Enlightenment sensibility. As Anne Vincent-Buffault explains in *The History of Tears: Sensibility and Sentimentality in France* (1991), “the tears of sensibility referred to a refined culture of the self. A series of aesthetic, ethical and even medical stakes delineated the limits of this developed sensibility” (53). Rather than appearing merely as a self-indulgent and impotent sign of grief, tears in the sentimental text were part of its rhetorical intent. They signaled the depth of feeling experienced by the mourners and attempted to trigger a corresponding emotional response in the reader. Baym asserts that tearful scenes underscore the “didactic” and “explicitly Protestant denominational” aims in these works, attempting to “induce reader tears by scenes in which everybody is crying” (*Woman’s Fiction* xx). Like Enlightenment tears of sensibility, tears of sentimentalism referred to a refined culture of the self; however, sentimental tears referred also to the individual’s spiritual state: “the emotions of the heart bespeak a state of grace, and these are known by the sound of a voice, the touch of a hand, but chiefly, in moments of greatest importance, by tears” (Tompkins 131). Although modern critics term such displays an

“emotional exhibitionism” and “exaggeration” that precludes actual feeling, sentimentalism’s expression of grace through tears points to “salvation, communion, reconciliation” (132).

Thus, the frequently (arguably, constantly) tearful Ellen in *The Wide, Wide World* is experiencing a continuous test of her faith in God. Her tears signify her vulnerability as well as the depths to which her resolve and faith are tested. Tears in the text also signal sympathetic connection between two individuals: in the moment when Alice must tell Ellen that she knows she will die from her illness, Alice “burst into tears” out of “sorrow for you, dear Ellie,” knowing that her news will be grievous to her friend (II, 274). At times, this sympathetic connection accompanies a spiritual realization:

Weeping with mixed sorrow and thankful joy, Ellen bent her head upon her little Bible to pray that she might be *more* changed; and then, as often did, raised the cover to look at the texts the beloved handwriting.

“I love them that love me, and those that seek me early shall find me.”

Ellen’s tears were blinding her. “That turned out true,” she thought.

“I will be a God to thee and to thy seed after thee.”

“That has come true too!” she said almost in surprise,—“and mamma believed it would.”—And then, as by a flash, came back to her mind the time it was written; she remembered how when it was done her mother’s head had sunk upon the open page; she seemed to see again the thin fingers tightly clasped;—she had not understood it then; she did now! “She was praying for me,” thought Ellen;—“she was praying for me! she believed that would come true.”

The book was dashed down, and Ellen fell to her knees in a perfect agony of weeping. (II, 159)

Ellen’s tears signify the spiritual comprehension of believer’s salvation, her continued grief over the loss of her mother, and the sympathetic connection that has been established between herself and her absent mother through the recognition of her mother’s Christian example.

One of the most significant tearful episodes is the exchange of grief that occurs as Alice’s illness overcomes her; both Alice and Ellen recognize that their tears should not be for Alice, who is going to Heaven. Alice acknowledges that she feels sad for Ellen (and Ellen for herself) because she must stay behind, though the parting is temporary. Prior to Alice’s passing, they talk

about her illness, knowing she will not survive long. Describing the parable of Jesus's meeting with Mary and Martha, Alice provides the key to understanding the rhetorical purpose of so many tearful scenes: "when He saw their tears and more saw the hearts that tears could not ease,—He even wept with them too! Oh I thank God for those words! . . . His love shed tears for them! And He is just the same now!" (II, 277). Sympathy through tearful exchange is Christlike. After Alice's death, Ellen grieves for her friend, but while her tears signify the depth of her loss, they also signify the spiritual acceptance of redemption through God (and only God): "She wept; but then again came sweeping over her mind the words with which she was so familiar,—'the days of thy mourning shall be ended;' and again with her regret mingled the consciousness that it must be for herself alone. And for herself, 'Can I not trust Him whom she trusted?' she thought" (II, 300).

Nineteenth-century American sentimental ideology's embrace of the True Womanhood values of religious piety, sexual purity, and domesticity allowed for related tropes to emerge that illustrated these principles and became inextricably linked to sentimentality. Because of the emphasis on domesticity and a woman's place in the home, mothers hold a particularly resonant and powerful place in sentimental literature, often in relation to their absences or to their place as witness to loss and death. The death or absence of the mother—as well as the morally redemptive and instructive place held by characters who serve as substitute mothers—figures prominently in major sentimental texts. In *The Wide, Wide World*, Ellen Montgomery's parting from her mother literally casts her upon the "wide world." Gertrude Flint, in *The Lamplighter*, is orphaned and abandoned to live with Nan Gant, who abuses her until she is rescued and adopted by the kind Trueman Flint. Topsy, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, motherless due to the cruelties of the

slave system, having never known a mother's love, becomes a wild, rebellious, angry child.

Such young women are left vulnerable to the cruelties of an indifferent world or the dangers of those who would prey upon them; they are viewed with sympathy since they lack not only the economic and physical protection of their fathers but also the more important moral guidance a mother would have provided. The loss of a mother is the first tragedy a young woman suffers, and her increased vulnerability brings additional pain because she has no one in which to confide, no one to protect her, and no one to guide her in the path of righteousness. Absent mothers are unable to protect the young women at the center of the novel from tragedy, so the characters' suffering offers guidance about both the consequence of their actions and the need to trust in God's providence. Surrogate mothers appear to impart moral instruction and give meaning to that misery. Ellen Montgomery meets Alice Humpreys, who not only instructs her when Ellen cannot attend school but teaches her religious faith, encouraging her to forgive her aunt's unkindness and seek to improve her own imperfections. Gertrude Flint befriends blind Emily Graham, who takes her as an informal ward when Trueman eventually dies. Emily provides a Christ-like model for Gertrude, teaching her Christian virtue and piety through love, gentleness, and self-sacrifice. Topsy is converted from a godless *enfant terrible* by the love and sacrifice of Little Eva, and Miss Ophelia is inspired to adopt Topsy and continue her moral education by Eva's example. This combination of suffering and teaching enables the protagonists' moral growth—often culminating in a final death-bed epiphany viewed as a Christ-like moral sacrifice—and the instructive power of the novel itself.

Alternatively, mothers who are present in a sentimental text demonstrate the suffering experienced through the loss of a child or the separation of a family, engendering sympathy in readers because this loss is both socially significant and believed to be universally relatable.

Lauren Berlant argues in *Female Complaint* that sentimental literature helped to create “women’s culture” while simultaneously relying on an assumed commonality among women in order to do so. Nineteenth-century “woman’s culture” was a form of mass-marketing that required “modes of sentimental realism that span fantasy and experience and claim a certain emotional generality among women, even though the stories that circulate demonstrate diverse historical locations of the readers and the audience, especially of class and race” (5). As Fisher points out, “[t]he sentimental novel creates the extension of feeling on which the restitution of humanity is based by means of equations between the deep common feelings of the reader and the exotic but analogous situations of the characters” (188). Berlant argues the “deep common feelings” required for the “extension of feeling” between reader and text is both a product and a producer of nineteenth-century “woman’s culture,” which charts a female kinship based on such assumed common experiences as motherhood (5).

In sentimental texts the trials of mothers were expected to generate sympathy among readers because of a cultural claim that all women share a common bond through the experience of being women and mothers. These novels operate on the assumption that motherhood—and a mother’s love for her children—is a universal aspect of womanhood. Thus, despite critical controversy regarding an individual novel’s position in the sentimental canon, *Ruth Hall* disrupts domestic convention and earns reader sympathy even when the title character breaks with the True Womanhood ideal of domesticity and embarks upon a public literary career. Her choice is sympathetically justified because she needs to support her children. Ruth is first presented as a woman who meets sentimental ideals, but after the death of her husband, she is left without financial support or protection. Ruth turns to writing because her talent results in better profits than such traditional female employments as piecework and teaching. She thinks of her children

while she writes, and her ultimate goal is to support her family and gain reunion with the daughter she has reluctantly placed with her malevolent in-laws.

Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* builds its sentimental case against the institution of slavery through a series of familial separations that center the text's focus upon maternal suffering, Christ-like sacrifice, and maternal care. George Harris cannot bear to live in slavery and escapes to Canada, leaving his family behind but promising to work to buy their freedom. His wife, Eliza, later flees slavery with their son, Harry, when she discovers plans to sell him. Uncle Tom is sold south and separated from his wife, Aunt Chloe. After he is sold a second time, Tom discovers Eliza's mother, Cassy, from whom she was separated as a child and who is now forced to live as overseer Simon Legree's mistress. Topsy, who has been sold away from her mother, is given as a gift by Mr. St. Clare to Miss Ophelia. Little Eva's death represents the pinnacle of familial separation, as her loss is not only that of a child from her family, but she is also the center of a spiritual family comprised of Tom, Topsy, and Miss Ophelia. The text reunites the enslaved in Canada, ultimately arguing that all who are spiritually saved will reunite in Heaven. Gillian Brown, in *Domestic Individualism*, asserts that Stowe's "religious interpretation of ideal maternal practices merges motherhood with Christianity. The self-sacrifice of women or slaves, then, signifies redemption and eternal life" (28). In sentimental texts, the love of a mother for her children serves as a metaphor for divine sacrifice and divine love, enabling Stowe to expand the metaphor into the arena of contemporary politics and slavery: "Stowe replaces the master-slave relation with the benign proprietorship of mother-child, transferring the ownership of slaves to the mothers of America" (32).

Twentieth-Century Anti-Sentimentalism

Despite the popularity of the sentimental novel and the cultural pervasiveness of sentimentalism in the nineteenth century, prevailing critical views hold that the twentieth century, with the rising influences of naturalism and realism, became increasingly hostile to the sentimental as a literary and political mode. Realism, naturalism, modernism, and post-modernism supposedly set themselves in opposition to romanticism and sentimentalism, figuring the latter forms as feminized as well as lacking qualities necessary to understand contemporary life and the modern individual. Sentimentalism became viewed as the product of a by-gone era. Twentieth-century writers consciously sought to move away from highly structured, moralistic presentations of social and religious life and de-emphasized an individual's ability to enact social change through moral rightness. Instead, modern authors tended to portray individuals with complex psychology who were subject to social and environmental forces that had overwhelming power to affect the course of their lives.

Although the origins of realism can be traced back to the eighteenth century, "the mid-nineteenth century was the era when realism began to be noticed and promoted (or discouraged) as not only a specific way of writing fiction but also a specific understanding of fiction's social role and responsibilities" (Glazener 16).⁷ William Dean Howells rose to prominence in the late nineteenth century with the publication of his realist novel, *A Modern Instance* (1882). He became one of the leading promoters and practitioners of American realism, publishing fiction and literary criticism into the early twentieth century. Linda Wagner-Martin also points to Stephen Crane's publication of *Maggie* (later subtitled *A Girl of the Streets*) in 1893, as a significant moment in realism's ascension as a dominant literary mode. With *Maggie*, Crane

⁷ Ian Watt, in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), identified a beginning for novelistic realism in eighteenth-century works that depicted psychologically complex individual characters in plausible social worlds. He argues that realism had been the fundamental tendency of the English novel since the eighteenth century.

“signaled that capturing the real was the significant aesthetic. Even if Crane’s verisimilitude was fictional, as it would be in his next work, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), the effect was the realism praised by Emile Zola, Gustave Flaubert, and the American writers Hamlin Garland and Frank Norris” (“Women Authors” 141).

The primary concern of realist fiction was to represent faithfully the lives of contemporary and “ordinary” people—those whom, as Nancy Glazener observes, were “neither very wealthy nor very poor” (19). In order to achieve its appearance of realism, this fiction sought “to depict characters with well-developed inner lives and situate them in thickly described social environments; and to simulate the language and interweavings of circumstance in the social worlds presented, avoiding conventionalized language and plot developments (or at least the conventions associated with the romance and other prior literary forms).” Realist fiction avoided direct allegory, and symbolism was to be self-effacing, utilized in such a way that it alludes to additional meanings while retaining the literal intent of the thing itself. Although critics have pointed out the ways realism can’t wholly avoid political perspective, writers sought a scientifically objective viewpoint that reflected the various political attitudes in a contemporary social group rather than endorsing a specific political stance: “Individual characters in realist novels might hold definite political views, but because reality itself did not conform to any system or program, realism ought not to rely on any either” (21).

Writers of realism engaged with and opposed the overtly symbolic and political stance of sentimental writing and reform novels, often figuring such debates in gendered terms. Although recent scholars have noted more overlap between realism and the genres it sought to oppose, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, proponents of realism directly countered the conventions of romance and sentimentalism as contrived, overdetermined, lacking in

verisimilitude, overtly political, and excessively feminine. While realist fiction sought to capture the chaos and messiness of life, critics disparaged the unrealistic, politicized social ordering that takes place in sentimental novels. Authors of realism “asserted realism’s masculine control of unruly materials,” using “rhetoric that often disparaged realism’s competitors as feminine” (Glazener 24).

Naturalism developed in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, growing in influence throughout the early twentieth century, as a response to and an extension of realism. The increasing attention to complex psychological portraits, individual experience, capitalist economy, and overwhelming social forces led to new understandings of modernity and the modern individual: “Realist characterization advanced both modern individualism and the equally modern project of producing knowledge about various demographic groupings. As individuals, leading characters in realist fiction tended to be capable of reflecting on their own private motives, interests, and moral capacities” (22). Even more strongly than realist writers, naturalists strove for a perception of objectivity, an “amoral attitude toward [their material]” (Den Tandt 96). And more strongly than classical realism, naturalism opposed literary traditions labeled as feminine, including the sentimental novel, domestic fiction, romance, and melodrama. Naturalist texts often depict the masculinized urban industrial world, city sprawl, and scenes of slum life through the experiences of the middle and lower classes. Many critics view naturalism as a response to Howellsian realism, which focused more on the everyday social rituals of the upper middle classes. Instead, authors like Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and Frank Norris sought to, in the words of Norris, “rough-shoulder [their] way among men” and find “healthy pleasure in the jostlings of the mob” (qtd. in Den Tandt 97).

Realist and naturalist writers developed a discourse of masculinity, in which they styled

themselves as objective observers of human nature; “acting as journalists or social-scientist investigators,” they sought to re-brand sentimental and domestic writing as “too feminized for turn-of-the-century conditions” (107). Such self-conscious rejection of sentimentalism “makes the pursuit of literary truth a gendered enterprise. Male writers challenge discourses of conformity they regard as feminized” (101). Many emblematic naturalist texts portray sentimental inauthenticity through parody or satire. Norris’s *McTeague* (1899) mocks sentimental representations of middle-class households and marriages, overtly linking monetary exchanges to social relationships and depicting grotesquely violent outcomes. Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1903) offers a naturalist version of *Charlotte Temple* by depicting an unrepentant, fallen woman who engages in prostitution and eventually rises to stardom; instead of being disgraced and punished by death, she discovers that her success will never lead to happiness. Another point of contention was realism’s representation of female sexuality and desire, as authors displayed female “sexual behavior destructive to themselves and their surroundings. This context made the female protagonists’ transgressions of sexual norms the benchmark of realistic radicalism” (Den Tandt 101). Realism directly contrasted sentimentalism’s focus on controlling female desire and channeling it toward socially acceptable avenues (as it also subtly acknowledged the risks and dangers of female sexuality). Instead, early naturalist novels offered a frankness about and fascination with female sexuality, often focusing on young women who engaged in prostitution or promiscuous relationships, leading Willa Cather to name them “lost lady narratives” (qtd. in Den Tandt 101).

By portraying their mode of writing as more real, more authentic, and more objective than sentimental, domestic, or romantic writing, and highlighting realism and naturalism’s relationship to the social conditions of the new century, these writers argued that the sentimental

novel no longer effectively captured either American experience or its cultural conditions. Despite realism and naturalism's need for sentimentalism by which to define themselves *against*, authors of these genres self-consciously argued that sentimentalism had no place in the modern era. They emphasized Darwinian, scientific, and objective analyses of social conditions over texts that depicted new world orders and Christian moral allegories. While sentimentalism helped solidify the developing middle class culture, realism and naturalism capitalized on increasing urbanization and new social structures created by larger metropolitan cities, capitalism, and tension between the middle and working class.

Modernism's New Aesthetic

Like proponents of realism and naturalism, critics of literary modernism view it as inherently anti-sentimental, not only rejecting the overtly moral and feminized novel of the previous era but also stressing the relationship between popular culture and High Modern mandates. Many critics date the advent of modern literature to the publication of Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* in 1903 because of the way in which the text refuses to make moral judgments about characters who themselves seem incapable of recognizing their actions in terms of good and evil. However, major American modernists Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and William Faulkner trace their lineage to Henry James, who developed a use of prose—particularly in his last completed novel, *The Golden Bowl* (1904)—that stays close to characters' thoughts and consciousness, broadening the narrative distance between text and reader. James's characters cannot fully decipher the significance of an event when it occurs; its meaning is revealed later. James also portrayed living abroad as desirable for American artists, and, encouraged by the favorable exchange rate, many modernist writers lived in Europe as expatriates.

Modernism, developed as a rejection of conservative realist values, encompasses the work of artists and writers who felt that traditional forms of art, literature, religion, social organization, and daily life were outdated because of changes in the economic, social, political structures of the rapidly industrializing twentieth-century world. Although not a broadly anti-religious movement, many modernists questioned the existence of an all-powerful, compassionate Creator, and one feature of modernist writing was to interrogate the accepted beliefs of the previous age. Modernist writing was preoccupied by looking both backward and forward, self-consciously examining “its own relation to history, and by how the present differed from the past,” showing ways in which the modern age is different and intensely investigating the old orders of religion, government, and society (Matthews 18).

Seeking to break away from the “overt morality” of nineteenth-century fiction, modernism worked to attain a more truthful form of realism than realist literature could achieve. Modernist fiction concentrated “on the immediate impact of writing’s effect upon its reader, whatever the subject-matter might be” (13). Such work endeavored to create an impact that was “unmediated by any guiding authorial voice, such as that familiar from Victorian novels. At the heart of the novel lies ‘stress and passion’ rather than a social or moral purpose” (13-14). The movement focused on presentation in prose—the artistic and aesthetic techniques of the writing and its ability to achieve particular effects—over a text’s moral or social message. By deliberately moving away from the ability of fiction to move the reader in moral or social directions, modernist writing set itself at odds with the sentimental fiction that dominated the previous century. Modernist critics and writers placed the ability to create narratives that eschewed moral viewpoints and instead objectively presented character experiences and thoughts through aesthetically innovative narrative structures at the pinnacle of artistic achievement.

They, therefore, devalued the types of writing that had marked the previous century: the moralistic, instructive sentimental novel that carefully structured life within a text in order to convey a message about life beyond the text.

Such a questioning of values appeared both thematically and structurally in modernist literature, as such poets as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot developed epics that responded to the “immediacy of [their] own times” while also “seeking to comprehend those times, and to critique those times, from the perspective of a vast historical time-span” (19). Heavily influenced by such modernist painters as Matisse, Kandinsky, and Picasso, poets and prose authors alike experimented with form, fragmenting texts and narrative structure, suspending grammar and punctuation rules—as demonstrated by Stein and e.e. cummings—and developing stream of consciousness techniques—used by Faulkner, Dos Passos, Woolf, and Joyce—to mimic the processes of real-time human thought and experience. Such writers embraced discontinuity and disjunction as methods of moving beyond simple realism in art and literature.

Despite its obsession with history and the desire to show how the modern age—the social changes wrought by the industrial advances of the twentieth-century—had produced new ways of thinking and being in the world, modernist philosophy emphasized “a form of discourse that has no designs on the world. It does not attempt to change things, but merely to represent them, and it does so in a specifically literary language whose claim to value lies in its uniqueness” (Tompkins 125). By emphasizing a work’s aesthetic structure or impact and devaluing its message or social purpose, modernist literature contributed to a shift in the way literature was evaluated in the twentieth century. According to modernist thinking, as Tompkins observes, “works whose stated purpose is to influence the course of history, and which therefore employ a language that is not only not unique but common and accessible to everyone, do not qualify as

works of art.” Under these new standards of artistic expression, sentimental literature’s direct claims to moral and social influence as well as its lack of stylistic or linguistic experimentation became viewed as disappointingly unrealistic, obvious, and feminized—a perspective that persists today.

As an artistic movement intent on capturing the zeitgeist of the new era, modernism not only sought to embody the energies and experiences of the fast-paced industrializing twentieth century, but it also worked to dismantle previous understandings of art, literature, and society that loomed large at the start of the new age. One of its largest targets was sentimental literature, which had adapted Enlightenment values of sensibility in the nineteenth century and shaped the world through a feminized, religious, middle-class lens of Victorian mores. Avant-garde intellectuals worked to create a niche for themselves as true artists and thinkers, but in order to do so they had to topple the giants that had come before them and had been embraced by the reading public. By defining themselves against sentimental literature, modernists were able to establish themselves “as a discourse community, defined by its adversarial relationship to domestic culture. Multiple issues of class and gender, power and desire, were contained in this opposition to the sentimental” (Clark 1).

Ironically, modernism, too, developed a complicated relationship with popular culture. On the one hand, by valuing experimentation, fragmentation, and aesthetic structure while separating literary style from political or social message, modernist writers increased the importance of the literary scholar and critic who was needed to interpret the work for the general public. By making their texts difficult to understand, modernist writers separated their work from popular culture, considering popularity an indication of poor quality and a low achievement in artistic or aesthetic value. The phenomenal popularity of the sentimental novel in the nineteenth

century was no longer an indication of its “realness” or its accuracy in reflecting the experiences of individuals, nor was it a sign of its value as literature. Instead, the record-breaking sales of the sentimental novel marked it as popular writing, a category separate from high literature.

Modernism created a gendered devaluation in which it “constituted itself by conflating the romantic with the sentimental and the popular. The private discourse of feeling and the public community of women, guardians of feeling, are, under modernism, both sentimental” (19). Yet, while modernism separated the low and popular from the high and inaccessible as indicators of artistic value, by the 1930s modernists and their critics had developed an interest in popular culture as an artistic subject, believing that the realities experienced by the masses were tangible and relevant to the current age. Common themes of daily life, advertising, and mass production appeared in visual art and literature, transformed from popular culture into high modern expression and experimentation.

In *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (1991), Suzanne Clark argues that modernism’s attack on sentimentalism enabled the movement to establish a new form of literary criticism that was intrinsically gendered and heavily dependent on the very thing it denigrated:

the political triumph of the new criticism which emerged was to install high modernism as a critical field which obsessively focused on the careers of Pound, Eliot, Joyce, and perhaps Stevens and Williams. High modernism meant that the works of a few male writers stood for a whole period of literary history, with a definition of literature that would seal off the anarchic forces of the revolution of the word. It left women out of the literary canon, and it made sentimental into a term of invective. (34-35)

However, in order to define itself as a significant literary movement, modernism required something significant to define itself against; it needed the sentimental to provide an opposing system of values even as it held up true expression of human feeling as a test of its authenticity and the efficacy of the aesthetics endorsed. Michael Bell, in *Sentimentalism, Ethics, and the*

Culture of Feeling (2000), observes that despite its criticism of the sentimental, “the modernist generation also continued the transformation of sentiment into an implicit criterion of true feeling, a development which even now largely escapes recognition whether in the common language of feeling or in the specialist practice of literary criticism” (160). The sentimental became “a short-hand for everything modernism would exclude, the other of its literary/nonliterary dualism” (Clark 9).

The legacy of the modernist movement continues to affect literary criticism as well as popular understandings of art and literature today, “separating literary style from rhetoric and political practice and estranging the serious critic from the popular community The high forms of literature came to define a ‘modernism’ at odds with cultural modernity” (35). Feminist scholars and critics who sought to recover sentimental and domestic writing had to overcome the literary/nonliterary dualism set in place by modernism and supported by the New Critics. The narrative of nonliterary value—the view that sentimental writing in the nineteenth century lacked artistic value and could be judged only as an artifact of popular, trite, women’s culture—enabled a dominant scholarly narrative that twentieth century authors all but turned away from sentimental forms and tropes, abandoning them under the censure of modernism’s growing influence. Clark, however, has shown that sentimentalism was an integral part of modernism’s development that could not be wholly left behind: “modernism rejected the sentimental, because modernism was sentimental. Modernism was still caught in a gendered dialectic which enclosed literature, making the text the object of a naturalized critical gaze” (7).

Marxism’s Emphasis on Secularism, Class Struggle, and Masculine Realism

By the mid-1930s, communist ideologies about social welfare and universal human

responsibility to a collective well-being were broadly circulating in the United States because of an influx of radical left thinkers as well as the stranglehold of the Depression. A socialist movement had been growing in the United States since the late nineteenth century: the Socialist Labor Party was formed in 1877, followed by the Socialist Democratic Party in 1897, and the Socialist Party of America in 1901. By 1919, left-leaning individuals left the Socialist Party to establish the Communist and Communist Labor Parties, uniting the two groups in 1923 to become the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA). The party had first organized in secret, but it became legally recognized in 1923. The CPUSA was a sectarian, ultraleft association until 1935 when it softened its approach, entering the period of the populist “People’s Front,” during which it sought support from liberals of many persuasions and backgrounds.

Communism as a political movement was closely linked to the contemporary arts and literary scene throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s. “Proletarian literature” was the term officially adopted by the American Communist Party to describe writing from the late 1920s and the 1930s that addressed concerns of the working class, the destructiveness of capitalism, and the potential for revolution. Supporters of Marxism sought to expand its cultural and political reach by founding John Reed Clubs—groups that encouraged writers and offered them financial support—and running journals that published political manifestos, creative work from both known and fledgling writers, and criticism of literature that promoted (and debated) Marxist philosophies about what constituted “good” proletarian literature. In September 1932 fifty-three artists and scholars—among them Malcolm Cowley, Granville Hicks, and Edmund Wilson—signed a letter in support of the revolutionary Communist Party and of the presidential candidacy of William Z. Foster. In 1935 the Popular Front created the League of American Writers, which included Nelson Algren, John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser, Clifton Fadiman, Lillian Hellman,

Ernest Hemingway, Langston Hughes, Archibald MacLeish, John Steinbeck, William Carlos Williams, and Richard Wright, to name a few. Leftist publications in the 1930s included the zealous *Daily Worker* and *The New Masses* as well as the more scholarly *Science & Society* and literary *Partisan Review* and *The Liberator*.

Although Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, the “fathers” of communist theory, did not develop a specific aesthetic philosophy or artistic ideology, they did occasionally write about art and literature. Such writings present three very different perspectives that remained an integral part of the debates that occurred among later Marxist critics who sought to evaluate literature on its revolutionary effect as well as its aesthetic value. Vincent Leitch, in *American Literary Criticism since the 1930s*, succinctly summarizes these views: “(1) art depends on a particular social formation; (2) art is (and should be) an instrument of political action; and (3) art is relatively autonomous” (5). Unlike modernism, which sought to separate political or social intent from a work’s literary value, Marxist literary criticism regards a text’s historical, political, and social objectives as key to understanding and appreciating its value.

Marxist philosophy posits that “the socioeconomic conditions of existence determine human consciousness, and not vice versa the economic relations of production (the economic base or infrastructure) determine the ideological formations of society (the cultural superstructure)” (5). Critics focused on analyzing the ways in which economic determinism produced certain kinds of citizens, social conditions, ideological perspectives, and life experiences within literary texts. Although there was debate among Marxist critics about the degree to which a novel or a text should be appreciated based on its revolutionary fervor versus its aesthetic sophistication, they agreed that social conditions were founded in material existence and that prose could reveal the way in which ideologies were formed from economic

foundations.

From the outset, Marxist literature and criticism were infused by communist class ideologies, integrating literary aesthetic with political theory. However, as the 1930s progressed, modernism's increasing influence began to affect the views of Marxist critics, spurring debate and creating a divide between those who focused on Marxist philosophy and those who increasingly emphasized Marxist aesthetics. Michael Gold—poet, novelist, executive editor of *The Liberator*, and founding editor of *The New Masses* in 1926—called for new prose forms of proletarian realism that would capture the working class experience and evoke revolutionary responses in the reader. In contrast, Granville Hicks, who succeeded Gold as editor of *The New Masses* in 1934 and served as the presiding officer at the first American Writers' Conference in 1935, “celebrated or criticized the value of any particular author to the degree that he exhibited a revolutionary attitude” (Leitch 10). Hicks emphasized three main criteria for Marxist literature, arguing that a work must focus on themes related to central issues of life, must “possess intensity, provoking the participation of the reader in the life portrayed by the work,” and must be from the point of view of the proletariat. By the late 1930s, critics Philip Rahv and William Phillips, along with novelist James T. Farrell, publicly disapproved of what they called Gold's “sentimental proletarianism” and Hicks's “mechanical materialism,” revealing a growing tension between “the doctrinaire and propagandistic politics of Hicks's *New Masses*” and “the liberal Marxist aesthetics and literary modernism of Rahv's and Phillips's *Partisan Review*” (14).

It might at first seem that Marxist critical emphasis on a text's relationship to historical and material conditions as well as political and social intent would have brought about a renewed appreciation for nineteenth-century sentimental writing because of its strong association with social reform. However, Marxist critics belittled women's writing of the previous century—as

well as the “sentimental”—for a number of reasons. For one thing, Marxists opposed sentimental fiction’s strong emphasis on Protestant Christian values and social structures based on Christian belief systems. Marxism questioned religion as a bourgeois social institution that—along with legal, philosophical, and political systems—keeps unequal economic power structures in place, structures that privilege the middle and upper classes. The *Communist Manifesto* states: “[I]aw, morality, religion, are to [the proletariat] so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests. All the preceding classes that got the upper hand sought to fortify their already acquired status by subjecting society at large to their conditions of appropriation” (72). Whereas sentimental fiction often envisions a new world order based upon Protestant Christian beliefs and reveals personal growth that inspires social reform founded upon the embrace of Christ-like personal sacrifice and God’s salvation, Marxism seeks to replace a Christian world order with one that is based upon political and economic equality for the proletariat: “All religions which have existed hitherto were expressions of historical stages of development of individual peoples or groups of peoples. But communism is that stage of historical development which makes all existing religions superfluous and supersedes them” (101). Marxist critics not only dismissed religion as a social structure as well as the Christian arguments of sentimental writers, but they also demanded secular perspectives in proletarian writing. They demanded that texts base their social critiques upon rational argument, “realist” depictions of working class experience, and a combination of modernist aesthetics with revolutionary philosophy.

Even more damning from a Marxist perspective was sentimental fiction’s focus upon, promotion of, and—many scholars argue—creation of the American middle class. The primary authors and audience of nineteenth-century women’s literature were, as Baym has pointed out,

“almost all of them Protestant, of English ancestry, and from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds” (*Woman’s Fiction* x). By repetitively insisting that women exist, occupy, and perform specific behaviors and social identities—and that a certain mode of being is the successful model to copy—sentimental novels “both recommend and perform a middle-class, privately possessive and self-possessive way of being in the world” (xxii). Heroines begin each novel experiencing the threat of poverty and the potential or actual loss of social station, so they must overcome moral and social obstacles to achieve middle-class security within domestic settings by novel’s end.

Amy Schrager Lang, in *The Syntax of Class: Writing Inequality in Nineteenth-Century America* (2003), argues that the developing middle-class during the nineteenth century was characterized by a denial of the existence of social class. She locates much of this “unwillingness to admit the existence of the values, interests, beliefs and ways of living embraced by those of other classes” in the domestic sphere (10). Although eschewing direct acknowledgment of class terms, sentimental literature presents an idealized home as representative of American culture and values and of individualism and self-possession, which by its materialism, organization, and methods inscribes middle-class existence as normative and desirable. Thus, definitions of home and portraits of home life found in sentimental fiction serve to define class as well as to demarcate the lines of social organization for readers of the period. Marxist critics deplored sentimentalism’s glorification of middle-class materialism and the ways in which it refuses to acknowledge class difference while simultaneously inscribing class structure.

Like the modernists and realists, Marxist writers and critics also participated in a gendered devaluation of sentimental writing. As proletarian writers responded to early twentieth century economic crises and promoted social reform, they tried to capitalize on the rising

influences of literary naturalism and realism to argue through fiction, poetry, and reportage that social and environmental factors—largely systemic abuses sanctioned and promoted by capitalism—lay at the root of working-class human misery. Such realism, however, was heavily masculinized: writers focused on largely male-dominated work spaces such as factories, mines, and fields, and the oppressed or triumphant worker was typified by a muscled, sweating, laboring male body that served to represent all workers and all parts of the working class. Michael Gold’s January 1929 *New Masses* column “Go Left, Young Writers” described the ideal proletarian text as centered upon “a wild youth of about twenty-two, the son of working class parents, who himself works in the lumber camps, coal mines, steel mills, harvest fields and mountain camps of America” (188). Later, in 1930, he published “Proletarian Realism,” arguing that “[b]ecause the Workers are skilled machinists, sailors, farmers and weavers, the proletarian writer must describe their work with technical precision let us proletarians write with the courage of our own experience. I mean, if one is a tanner and writer, let one dare to write the drama of a tannery; or of a clothing shop, or of a ditch-digger’s life, or of a hobo” (206-07). In 1935, Edwin Seaver, another influential Marxist critic, defined proletarian realism in the *New Masses*, charging writers to “take a conscious part in leading the reader through the maze of history toward Socialism and the classless society” (23-24). Following this creed, proletarian writers depicted harsh scenes of industrial abuse, inhumane working environments, strikes, violence, and human suffering in order to reveal and critique the social conditions that contribute to working-class oppression and argue for large-scale reform, thus promoting a Socialist revolution and contributing to an entrenched masculinized ideology. Sentimental fiction’s emphasis on the middle-class, bourgeois domestic space was considered feminized and trivial, and was placed in opposition to the serious, masculinized, working-class struggle of proletarian texts.

This push for hard-hitting literary realism, however, left many proletarian writers open to charges of overdoing their depictions, of emotional falseness in their characters and plots. They were accused of writing sappy melodramas that excluded their work from the ranks of what modernist and subsequent critics designated as “literature.” Critics who registered some alignment between Gold’s project of stirring the reader through realist scenes to revolutionary awareness and sentimental fiction’s ability to move the reader on an emotional level actually denigrated attempts to move through feeling as “sentimental proletarianism,” equating it as mere emotional propaganda. As with the modernists, the term “sentimental” became a Marxist shorthand term for feminized and maudlin attempts to influence readers into an emotional state. Criticisms of proletarian writing, both as it emerged in the 1930s and later in the century, often used the term “sentimental,” meaning that they found the works to be overwrought and emotionally contrived. Writing for *The North American Review* in 1939, W. R. Steadman discusses fiction by Michael Gold, Edward Newhouse, Jack Conroy, Myra Page, Josephine Herbst, Grace Lumpkin, William Rollins, Edward Dahlberg, Nelson Algren, and Robert Cantwell, to name a few. He largely dismisses proletarian writing as a whole, citing the “tragic triviality” and “sentimentalism” of poems and fiction produced by nearly every major writer of the genre (146, 148). Steadman writes, “[m]ost proletarian novelists are what might be called lumpenliterati; they can’t write and they haven’t the shadow of an idea of what constitutes literature. Merely to yell about the woes of workers and farmers is not to write literature” (152). Literature, according to the increasingly modernist critical establishment, “requires not merely observational accuracy; it requires also emotional honesty,” and the proletarian emphasis on depicting working-class suffering while promoting a Socialist message cannot, according to modernist philosophy, achieve both.

New Criticism's Intrinsic Analytical Focus

The literary movement called New Criticism, which dominated literary scholarship during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, emphasized a work of art as divorced from history and social or cultural conditions. Like modernist critics, New Critics concentrated on the structure of a piece of literature; however, their new formalist mode of interpretation insisted that a text's meaning and quality should be determined entirely from its intrinsic qualities and its ability to operate as an aesthetic whole. Although early New Critics focused primarily on poetry, this structural approach affected critical conventions for analyzing all of literature. Significantly, New Criticism's approach to literature—ignoring historical and cultural context, writer intent, and reader reception—contributed to the already extant dismissal of nineteenth-century women's writing, sentimentalism, and the gendered division of respected literary forms and criticism.

Proponents of New Criticism located all meaning within the body of a text and argued that the critic's job was to interpret that message by analyzing and evaluating the function of a text's features and components—its linguistic, semantic, poetic, aesthetic, philosophical, and metaphoric structure. For New Critics, “the beginning and end of criticism was the literary work itself—not philosophy, sociology, economics, or other non-literary concerns” (Leitch 19). By exploring the structure of the work and focusing on the words in relation to the text as a whole, New Critics claimed to purify poetic criticism—and literary criticism in general—from the extrinsic concerns of political beliefs, social backgrounds, historical contexts, philosophical views, and cultural conditions. In order to practice this methodology, they provided “close readings” of texts, most often poems. According to the New Critics, the critic's job was to judge the text objectively, “to determine whether or not it worked efficiently. All parts had to work together; no part could be irrelevant interpretation came about following multiple

retrospective analyses, which conferred a certain feeling of objectivity and omniscience upon New Critical close readings” (26).

Because New Critics believed that this system allowed a text to become a stand-alone object that could be depersonalized, the personal response of a reader to a text was thought to be of little importance: “It did not matter whether the response was that of a reader of the present day or that of a reconstructed historical reader of a previous era. The reader’s reception of a text was ruled out beforehand as distracting to properly critical analysis” (25). Literature existed as an independent object that made meaning *in and of itself* without requiring a reader: “[s]imply stated, literature exists; it *is*” (26). Thus, a “good” piece of literature according to the New Critics—so considered because of its strong intrinsic, aesthetic, and structural qualities—would have the same effect on a reader regardless of the time in which it was written and the time during which it was read. New Critics dismissed most of sentimental literature because, by their close reading standards, the texts did not live up to structural evaluations and aesthetic judgments that privileged distance, irony, internal literary allusion, and linguistic sophistication over direct appeal to the reader, clear and simple language, religious parable, and repetitive tropes that drew from and were reified by nineteenth-century popular culture.

Many scholars of sentimental literature have shown that such texts are, in fact, based upon a structure that creates and depends on a relationship with the reader because of their emotional and instructional premise: to teach through feeling requires establishing a connection with the reader, so the literature cannot simply exist as an autonomous object per the New Critical model. Tompkins maintains that sentimental novelists “have designs upon their audiences, in the sense of wanting to make people think and act in a particular way” and that sentimental novels “make continual and obvious appeals to the reader's emotions and use

technical devices that are distinguished by their utter conventionality” in order to achieve this aim (xi, 125). Samuels argues that, in contrast to New Critic condemnations of sentimental writing as excessively emotional and sloppy (which implies a lack of literary skill or sophistication), sentimental literature operates according to a set of carefully structured rules that anticipate and adjust reader responses in order to achieve its goals: “The reform literature associated with sentimentality works as a set of rules for how to ‘feel right,’ privileging compassion in calibrating and adjusting the sensations of the reader in finely tuned and predictable responses to what is viewed or read” (5). Not only does sentimental literature “calibrate” responses in the reader, it produces the reading subject: “The sentimental complex also situates the reader or viewer: that is, the act of emotional response the work evokes also produces the sentimental subject who consumes the work. This production crucially involves a movement of sympathy, in all its anxious appeals, across race, class, and gender lines” (6).

Critic Elizabeth Barnes asserts that sentimental texts seek to subordinate democratic politics with a “politics of affinity, employing a method of affective representation that dissolves the boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other’” (4). In order to do this, sentimental texts teach “a particular way of reading both texts and people that relies on likeness and thereby reinforces homogeneity. In the sentimental scheme of sympathy, others are made real—and thus cared for—to the extent that they can be shown in relation to the reader.” Such a technique requires an interpretive structure that goes beyond the boundaries of the text and includes the reader, in fact requires identification between the reader and the text itself. As Davidson has shown, modern critics who are influenced by the New Critical model and who condemn the written style of the sentimental novel while ignoring the sentimental novel’s historical and social context misunderstand the ways in which the original readers of the sentimental novel would have

interpreted the text:

The sentimental novel spoke far more directly to the fears and expectations of its original readers than our retrospective readings generally acknowledge. Conveniently divorcing the novel from the social milieu in which it was originally written and read, recent critics easily condemn as clichéd and overdone the plight of the assailed, sentimental heroine hovering momentarily between what seems a mechanical fall (seduction), on the one hand, and an automatic salvation (marriage), on the other. Yet for her and her reader the choice was desperate. Moreover, if the right decision would not necessarily assure her happiness, the wrong one would guarantee suffering in abundance. So the contemporary critic literalizes and thereby trivializes what the contemporaneous reader took symbolically and thus seriously. (122)

Ignoring the ways in which the sentimental writing style constituted a direct appeal to readers and developed an emotional relationship between the text and its reading audience, this anti-reader stance places New Critics in strong opposition to the project of nineteenth-century sentimental literature, both as its authors directly stated and as the texts rhetorically operated, and ignores the ways in which style and structure works within sentimental texts in relation to their particular aims. Because New Critics were seeking ways to define “Literature,” to differentiate the high from the low, and to claim and professionalize a method of critical evaluation that was objective and definitive, concentrating on the perceived flaws in sentimental literature’s “intrinsic” properties allowed them to further define their own critical project. According to the New Critics and the critical schools that followed who were influenced by their practices, literary texts “such as the sentimental novel, that make continual and obvious appeals to the reader’s emotions and use technical devices that are distinguished by their utter conventionality, epitomize the opposite of everything that good literature is supposed to be” (Tompkins 125).

Unfortunately for sentimental literature, even after New Criticism waned as a coherent movement, their methodology and pedagogical practices had become widespread and influenced the entire field of literary studies. Another effect of the New Critics was to professionalize literary criticism, locating it in universities, so that the primary purveyors of literary criticism—

the primary determiners of what constitutes “good” literature, what is included in the canon, what is taught, and how it should be understood—are professors of literature. In 1937, John Crowe Ransom published a pedagogical directive in “Criticism, Inc.” where he proposed to locate criticism in universities, to systematize its process through collaboration and to make it a profession. Such a reorganization would, in effect, shift the role of literary critic away from book reviewers and essay writers in literary journals to academics. As Leitch observes, “[t]hat something very like this happened is quite clear: in our era the gentleman-critic, the poet-critic, and the man of letters have been replaced by the professional university critic” (34).

Consolidating the profession of criticism not only enabled New Critics to find new forms of legitimacy for their practice; it also enabled them to disseminate their methodologies and influence the practice of literary criticism well beyond the movement’s most powerful years. Although historical, social, cultural, and political context are now considered as part of literary criticism, the intrinsic aesthetic qualities of a text are still highly valued. Sentimental literature is still heavily criticized for its inability to meet these standards, its use of emotional appeals as well as conventional tropes and technical devices; the criticism is so standard and so forcefully rendered that the style of sentimentalism is considered a relic of a bygone era, a quaint reminder of an age when the “mob of scribbling women” dominated the literary marketplace.

*Sentimental Proletarianism: “All that feel the same, they are together”*⁸

The irony, perhaps, of the critical charges brought against proletarian writers that accused them of sentimentality is that such observations are, in some cases, unintentionally accurate, particularly when considered through today’s new understandings of the nineteenth-century sentimental mode. Early- and mid-twentieth-century critiques of proletarian writers as

⁸ Meridel Le Sueur, “They Follow Us Girls” (1935).

“sentimental” were intended to point out their work’s lack of emotional realism and the ways it didn’t live up to modernist and New Critical literary principles. Such criticisms also highlighted the supposedly feminized qualities of the writing. These indictments did not, however, recognize the “sentimental” in these works as the deliberate use of a political and rhetorical strategy associated with emotional sympathy and affectional bond. This view of sentimentalism, as has been previously discussed, was a critical re-evaluation prompted by Jane Tompkins, Philip Fisher, Shirley Samuels and a number of other scholars in the mid-1980s and early 1990s. Some proletarian writers who stood accused of the grossest violations against what counted for “good literature” had indeed employed sentimentalism as a deliberate rhetorical strategy. Like the nineteenth-century authors vilified by the modernists for their maudlin sympathies and common appeal, they employed their pens to reform moral views and advocate for improved social conditions.

Drawing upon nineteenth-century models and familiar sentimental tropes of the mother spurred to protective action, the young woman vulnerable to an indifferent male-dominated world, feminized sexual exploitation and tragedy, and feeling-influenced moral education, a modern sentimentalism re-emerges in 1930s fiction as a means of influencing readers to identify with the proletarian and to argue for improvements to the labor conditions as well as the lives of the working class. While revealing dangerous and unhealthy conditions in factories, mines, and farms, such writers focus on the home and family to show the integral connection between domestic and industrial spheres. This revised sentimentalism appears more frequently in female-authored fiction: women writers use the sentimental mode to emphasize the cornerstones of motherhood and family as intrinsic to the proletarian community as well as the imagined human community at large.

The sentimental mode allows such proletarian authors as Grace Lumpkin, Josephine Johnson, and John Steinbeck to refigure the working-class as legitimate recipients of middle-class sympathy. During the 1930s, members of the working-class were fighting against exploitation by their employers and by a middle class that benefited from the products of their labor. In order to achieve reforms, they had to convince the middle class that they deserved government protection. Where logical, political, and economic arguments for reform failed, these authors appealed to the sympathies of middle class readers by positioning the working class as outsiders who can be understood because of their dedication to family and because of their suffering. Applying familiar sentimental tropes to working class bodies and figuring the traditionally masculine proletarian worker in a “feminized” sentimental form, these authors argued not only for extending sympathy to the working class but that such sympathy would lead to a radical political awakening. By drawing upon the emotions of their readers, Lumpkin, Johnson, and Steinbeck call attention to the humanist principles at work within sentimentalism and suggest that the recognition of others’ suffering leads to a motivation for proletarian action.

Significantly, most of the authors who wrote sentimental proletarian fiction were not themselves working class, although many witnessed these struggles through reportage; they were members of the CPUSA, participated in strikes, and lived among the working-class for periods of time. Not only did real-world circumstances empower middle-class individuals to write these stories by providing access to education, funds, and the types of employment or leisure time in which to write novels that were generally denied working-class writers, but their desire to speak *for* the economically disenfranchised led to their speaking *through* the voices of the working class. By appropriating the voices of the working-class and attempting to combine both the sentimental and realistic modes in the telling of their stories, proletarian authors speak on behalf

of and through the disenfranchised to create a sympathetic bridge with the skeptical, modern reader. Aware of the flaws of this idealized system, such proletarian writers critique the inability for working-class men and women to attain sentimental gender ideals because of their fight for survival, using such failures to endorse proletarian values. Simultaneously, these failures confer sympathy for the working class and promote collective action.

Neo-Slave Narratives and the Sentimental Tradition

At their inception, sentimental novels and slave narratives emerged as parallel but different literary forms. Slave narratives developed as a largely autobiographical genre, focused on establishing a text's veracity in order to reveal the atrocities of the institution of slavery and, simultaneously, to argue for the humanity of the enslaved. Accounts of slavery and autobiographical narratives were published in a variety of formats from the eighteenth century through the beginning of the twentieth century. However, the genre exhibited a stylistic evolution, as William L. Andrews expertly outlines in *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*, that developed from arguing that the black former slave is a "brother and man" to whites (and especially to white readers) to, later in the nineteenth century, more individualistic portrayals of selfhood in which authors seek to prove themselves to be moral, spiritual, and intellectual peers of whites (1, 3). Even as the authors of slave narratives sought to argue for the humanity of the enslaved or to demonstrate the ways in which white culture marginalized black identity, the authenticity of the text was of constant concern because skeptical reviewers were quick to point out what they termed were exaggerations—and even lies—in order to undermine abolitionist arguments and support counter-narratives that presented slavery as a benign institution. Thus, when authors began to incorporate novelized features into

the narratives—such as the addition of dialogue or third-person narration—to dramatize their stories and increase the impact of their messages, they encountered challenges to the truthfulness of their stories. Thus, Andrews points out: “The reception of [an author’s] narrative as truth depended on the degree to which his artfulness could hide his art” (3).

Sentimental novels, on the other hand, were published as fiction and made no claims to conveying autobiographical truthfulness. Furthermore, as Dobson argues, such novels were written with an artfulness that was, of necessity, easily recognized by readers. This ability to identify the tropes and devices by which sentimental novels function allowed readers to decipher the moral messages encoded within the narrative. Ironically, despite accusations against sentimental novels and sentimentalism for an inability to portray “real feeling”—and a melodramatic mimicry of emotion—the sentimental novel’s goal of “veracity” was the desire to achieve a truth in its portrayal of emotional experience and its moral imperative. While scholars have argued that the moral and social messages inhabiting sentimentalism ranged from critiquing the social outcomes of coverture (Davidson) to establishing a new form of social republic (Barnes), as the nineteenth century progressed, sentimental authors also sought to contribute to the public discussion of slavery. With the rising popularity of the slave narrative form, sentimental novels were heavily influenced by the genre, as evidenced by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Mary Langdon’s [Mary Hayden Green Pike] *Ida May* (1854), and (on the pro-slavery side of the debate) Caroline Lee Hentz’s *The Planter’s Northern Bride* (1854).

Such influence extended in two directions. As the best-selling status of sentimental literature revealed its popularity, slave narrative authors began to incorporate fictional elements and sentimental features into autobiographical accounts of slavery. Abolitionists quickly

recognized the appeal of first-hand accounts of slavery, acknowledging that personal narrative was a far more effective tool in advancing their cause than were political pamphlets, flyers, and speeches that focused upon legal or rhetorical arguments. Anti-slavery organizations and abolitionist groups actively sought to publish and disseminate interviews, biographies, and fugitive autobiographies that revealed the horrors of slavery in order to promote their political agenda. Many anti-slavery groups adopted the tactic of “moral suasion,” focusing their appeals upon the basic goodness of human nature in order to convince people that slavery was wrong for moral reasons. Such groups were aware that they could capitalize on growing reader interest in the lives of former slaves, not only to expose the hardships and evils of slavery, but also to adopt principles of instruction based on sympathy and religious (moral) correctness that was an integral part of sentimental fiction and the Culture of Sentiment: “[i]ts methods were the same that had been used by evangelical religious denominations for decades . . . like the revivalists, abolitionist leaders believed that slaveholders and others who supported the institution—either outwardly or through indifference—could be convinced of the evils of slavery” (Risley 41). Embarking on a campaign of moral suasion, abolitionist presses flooded the North and South with “antislavery fiction and poems, accounts of fugitive slaves, reports of slave kidnappings, criticism of colonization plans, and stories of free blacks,” (42) and published hundreds of book-length accounts of life under slavery written by fugitive slaves.⁹

⁹ The most active period of slave narrative publication occurred in the mid-nineteenth century, presumably as part of increasing abolitionist agitation leading up to the Civil War and in response to the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. It is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain the exact number of slave narratives that were published; scholarly estimates place the total number of published slave narratives still in existence between 85 and 142, while other accounts number between 2,000 and more than 6,000 if court records, broadsides, and interviews are included (Foster, FS 21). Frances Smith Foster observes, however, that the estimates of slave narratives that are still in existence likely represent only “a small portion of those which were written” (22). It is useful to consider the number of editions printed and copies sold during the mid-nineteenth century to gauge the genre’s popular appeal. According to Foster, Moses Roper’s 1838 narrative went through 11 editions; Frederick Douglass’s 1845 narrative published seven editions in four years; William Wells Brown’s 1847 narrative sold four editions in its first year; and

Although not the only sentimental novel to take slavery as its subject, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* firmly convinced abolitionists of the power of sentimental fiction to persuade readers. After its publication and dramatic sales success in 1851-52, anti-slavery novels as well as slave narratives were all compared to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in their ability to move readers. When Richard Hildreth published an expanded edition of his anti-slavery novel, *The Slave; or, Memoirs of Archy Moore* (1836) as *The White Slave* in 1852, a reviewer in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* observed that “readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will take it as the highest style of recommendation to say of this book, that it will be read with as deep an interest and as ineffaceable [sic] an impression as that masterly work” and that “[w]e hope it may be as extensively read as Mrs. Stowe's great work; it will do invaluable service in intensifying the hostility to slavery that exists, and may perhaps open the eyes of some of the friends or apologists of the system, to some of its enormities.”

When the narrative of Solomon Northup was published in 1853 under the title *Twelve Years a Slave*, amanuensis David Wilson claimed to present “a faithful history of Solomon Northup's life, as [I] received it from his lips” (xvi). Northup's narrative is dedicated to Harriet Beecher Stowe and introduced as “another Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin” on its frontispiece. Because the narrative itself invites immediate comparison, a reviewer from the 1853 *Detroit Tribune* judged the autobiographical quality of Northup's narrative against the fictional impact of Stowe's novel:

Next to “Uncle Tom's Cabin,” the extraordinary Narrative of Solomon Northup is the most remarkable book that was ever issued from the American press. Indeed, it is a more extraordinary work than that, because it is only a simple unvarnished tale of the experience of an American freeman of the “blessings” of Slavery, while Mrs. Stowe's Uncle Tom is only an ingenious and powerfully wrought novel, intended to illustrate what Solomon saw and experienced—Southern Slavery, in its various phases.

Indeed, abolitionists believed that the power of sympathy awakened by the sentimental novel could be just as forcefully wrought in the slave narrative because of its claims to real-life

Josiah Henson's 1849 narrative experienced a jump in sales after it was revealed that he was a model for Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom, going from sales of 6,000 copies in its first three years to over 100,000 copies.

experience and, thus, offers a truth of suffering that inspires even greater sympathy. When Frederick Douglass published *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855, a reviewer declared “[w]e have read nothing since *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which so thrilled every fiber of the soul and awoke such intense sympathy for the slave as this touching autobiography. It is a sad thought, that what Frederick Douglass suffered in slavery, three million of human beings are this day suffering” (“Miscellaneous”).

As slave narratives developed in the nineteenth century, some authors began simultaneously to assert their texts’ autobiographical veracity and use novelized techniques to increase audience appeal, critique prevailing ideas promoted in contemporary literature, and generate sympathy for ideological messages. As the autobiographical authenticity of a slave narrative was integral to establishing its authority (and sympathy), the presence of novelized features caused some disagreement over the categorization of various slave narratives as fiction or autobiography. Andrews points out that such works as Frederick Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom* and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) have, at times, been dismissed from the genre of autobiography and criticized for their fictionalized style, particularly due to the presence of reconstructed dialogue between slaves and masters in combination with sentimental appeals (269-71).

The symbiosis between slave narratives and sentimental novels indicates an awareness of the usefulness of sympathy as a method for reaching readers as well as a convergence of political and cultural interests—sentimental novelists often promoted abolition, while slave narrative authors were frequently supporters of the women’s rights movement. Both slave narratives and sentimental novels also struggle with the forms of power encoded within their ideological systems. Though often upholding white patriarchal power by teaching women to maintain

familial relationships, sexual purity, religious piety, and strict rules of social decorum, sentimental novels also subvert existing power structures by arguing for women's individual legitimacy and placing them, and the domestic realm, at the center of the new social order they promote. Slave narrative authors not only capitalized on the use of emotional appeals to challenge existing white patriarchal structures and argue for their own human legitimacy, they also examined the ways in which sentimental novels that value domesticity, chastity, and gentility—qualities available only to middle-class whites—exclude African American women from sentimental female ideology and maintain racial ideologies that promote white dominance.

Although the presence of novelistic features raised debate over the “authenticity” of slave narratives that do not follow a strictly autobiographical writing style, more recent critical assessments of fictionalized slave narratives have explored the ways such authors critique contemporary social ideologies that are promulgated in sentimental literature and antebellum culture. Women's narratives such as Jacobs's *Incidents* and Sojourner Truth's *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1850) have been noted by Hazel Carby and Lori Merish for their use of sentimental conventions to interest a white, middle-class, female readership while also “engag[ing] with the codes of gendered identity that measure black women's exclusion from full (civil) subjectivity in nineteenth-century America” (Merish 193). African American women's narratives expose “the ways in which sentimentalism both constitutes and delimits forms of female political agency, subjectivity, and desire in liberal political culture.” Similarly, Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), credited as the first novel published by an African American woman but more recently shown to be highly autobiographical, incorporates sentimental conventions that appeal to white reader interest and sympathy while, like the books by Jacobs and Truth, undermining the ideology behind the exclusively white “cult of true womanhood” and creating

an argument for the legitimacy of black womanhood.

The use of sentimental conventions has most frequently been critiqued in slave narratives written by women, although men's slave narratives of the late antebellum era also began to incorporate such fictional stylistic elements as dialogue and emotionally charged scenes. Changes between Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* and his 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom* reveal his increasing use of novelistic features to incorporate stronger connections with community and family without altering his presentation of independent, self-reliant manhood. Examinations of slave narratives written by women have generally focused on the ways women writers undercut the marginalization created by sentimental ideology, whereas examinations of men's fictionalized slave narratives have focused on their use of sentimental conventions to increase identification with white masculine agency. Interestingly, while women's fictionalized slave narratives are thought to "demystify sentimental fictions of white male protection, sentimental ownership, and 'civilized' masculine authority" (Merish 193), narratives written by men are often shown to use those conventions in the development of tension between individuality and community. Men's narratives also critique the ideological marginalization preventing African Americans from performing the masculine role of self-governing actor, protector, provider, and property owner. Slave narratives written by men often conflate the acquisition of literacy with freedom and manhood, and fugitive slave autobiographies of the late antebellum era incorporate sentimental conventions to heighten this presentation of manhood by highlighting, however problematically, the male slave's identification with white male mastery and privilege.

While slave narratives written by men may depict sentimentalized emotional scenes and emphasize family or community connection, they often represent the male author as an

independent, self-made man in order to counter feminized associations with family, community, and victimhood. Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* adds to his original *Narrative* a few instances of dialogue and sentimentalized depictions of female relatives; Douglass continues in the later autobiography, however, to conflate manhood with freedom and to underscore both his manly physical development and his attainment of autonomy. Similarly, William Wells Brown incorporates some fictionalized techniques in the *Narrative of William W. Brown* (1847), but he still depicts the necessity to break away from his family to obtain freedom and, like Douglass, correlates the attainment of freedom with the attainment of manhood: "I was no more a chattel, but a man! . . . The fact that I was a freeman—I could walk, talk, eat and sleep as a man, and no one to stand over me with the blood-clotted cowhide—all this made me feel that I was not myself" (103-04). Few slave narratives written by men, if any, are credited with openly critiquing sentimental fiction's gender ideology, and most uses of such conventions in male writing are thought to associate sentimentality with the promotion of African American manhood through the attainment of such racially privileged technologies as literacy and property ownership. Thus, nineteenth-century slave narratives show active engagement with the sentimental novel, as many adopted its techniques in order to win "to anti-slavery many hearts which else would have remained cold and indifferent" (Douglass, *Life and Times* 572). But in adopting the literary form, slave narrative authors found it imperative to critique the race and gender ideologies implicit within nineteenth-century sentimentalism.¹⁰

¹⁰ For example, the autobiography of Jermain W. Loguen, *The Rev. J. W. Loguen, as a Slave and as a Freeman* (1859), is a male-authored slave narrative that contains the features of a traditional slave narrative while also utilizing the conventions of the sentimental novel to establish reader sympathy. Loguen works to legitimate both African American manhood and womanhood through complex presentations of maternal suffering and familial separation. Loguen connects literacy, freedom, and manhood with feeling, community, and action, utilizing the sentimental genre to create more complex gender presentations and disrupt the established male/female slave binary.

In the twentieth century, many African American authors returned to the subject of slavery in their texts, publishing novels that depict fictional recreations of life in American slavery or that draw parallels between contemporary social and economic conditions and nineteenth-century slavery. In his 1987 study, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, Bernard W. Bell coined the term “neo-slave narrative” to describe “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (289); the term is now applied to a broad range of texts that are influenced by the slave narrative genre. This genre has grown to include works set during the time of slavery as well as any time from Reconstruction to the Jim Crow era to the present. There exists a variety of textual experimentation among neo-slave narratives, so that while they gesture toward the generic conventions of nineteenth-century slave narratives, many also experiment with style, form, chronology, point-of-view, and structure. However, regardless of their structural differences, “these texts illustrate the centrality of the history and the memory of slavery to our individual, racial, gender, cultural, and national identities” (Smith, V 168). As works of literature written in the twentieth-century, with the benefit of both the passage of time and critical trends such as postmodernism that encourage self-reflexive art, neo-slave narratives “possess a measure of creative and rhetorical freedom unavailable to the freed and fugitive slaves who wrote narratives during the antebellum period” (169). Additionally, Valerie Smith observes, authors of neo-slave narratives

write from a perspective informed and enriched by the study of slave narratives, the changing historiography of slavery, the complicated history of race and power relations in America and throughout the world during the twentieth century, and the rise of psychoanalysis and other theoretical frameworks. They are therefore free to use the imagination to explore the unacknowledged and elusive effects of the institution of slavery upon slaves, slaveholders, and their descendants. (169)¹¹

¹¹ For more on the genre of neo-slave narratives, see Ashraf Rushdy’s *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999) and *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction* (2001), Caroline Rody’s *The Daughter’s Return: African American and Caribbean Women’s Fictions of History* (2001), Angelyn Mitchell’s *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in*

Authors of neo-slave narratives are as concerned with the effects of slavery on those who directly experienced it as they are with the generations who deal with its legacy.

The authors of twentieth-century neo-slave narratives explore a variety of themes in their works such as definitions of freedom and bondage, the cultural role of religion, white supremacy and white privilege, interconnections of race and gender, black masculinity, external control of black women's bodies, definitions of family, orality and literacy, living histories, and traumatic recurrence. Because African American women were subjected to additional, extreme marginalization under slavery and under the definitions of womanhood offered by sentimentalism, many authors of twentieth century women's neo-slave narratives do more than just examine the legacy of slavery in a contemporary context. They also take on the legacy of sentimentalism as it is intertwined with the slave narrative, adopting the sentimental mode in order to remind contemporary readers of the suffering experienced by enslaved persons and to show how that suffering has impacted later generations. Simultaneously, such authors critique sentimentalism's gender and race tropes, showing that oppressive ideologies which have survived into the modern era were developed during slavery. In so doing, writers of women's neo-slave narratives, which appeared after the publication of the Moynihan Report (1965) were responding to contemporary de-valuations of black womanhood and community as well as revealing that (white) perspectives of African-American identity were shaped by a bifurcated cultural legacy of slavery versus white supremacy.

Chapter Summaries

This project brings together six novels that illustrate contemporary sentimental

Contemporary Black Women's Fiction (2002), and Arlene R. Keizer's *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* (2004).

appropriation. The first three texts are examples of significant proletarian fiction from the 1930s and demonstrate the ways in which the sentimental mode was adopted to extend sympathy for the working-class, a new subject for the traditionally middle-class, white sentimental novel. Sentimental proletarian writers teach the middle-class reader to “feel right” by recognizing the legitimacy of working-class families and sympathizing with their struggles, a sympathy which is directed toward revolutionary action. Although the authors of proletarian sentimentalism were not themselves members of the working class, they acquired information about working-class experiences through reportage and interviews. Like their nineteenth-century counterparts who turned to the novel to argue for social reform, these texts are the result of efforts to demonstrate the plight of the working class and reach readers more effectively than is believed possible through non-fiction.

Whereas proletarian authors sought to extend sympathy to those who were “Othered” by class, authors of neo-slave narratives not only contend with racial “Othering,” but they also address the historical links between slave narrative and sentimental fiction genres. The final three texts in this study are prominent examples of neo-slave narratives that experiment widely with form, ranging from historical fiction to science fiction to a postmodern ghost story. As twentieth-century authors address contemporary racial conflicts and the legacy of slavery, they also attend to the ways in which sentimentalism not only contributed to the development of African American letters but also played a role in maintaining the racial “Othering” that persists today. Just as slave narrative authors of the nineteenth-century adopted sentimental forms while critiquing sentimental marginalization of black identity, the novels under examination investigate the relationship between suffering and sympathy as well as constructions of the African American family and gender roles. Neo-slave narrative authors draw from family oral history

accounts of slavery as well as published slave narratives to construct their re-imaginings of slave experience in the modern era. In their various generic experiments, these authors play with the relationship between time and history as well as cultural memory.

In Chapter II, I examine Grace Lumpkin's 1932 novel *To Make My Bread* as an important example of proletarian sentimental fiction. I argue that Lumpkin's novel adopts the sentimental mode, both upholding and critiquing nineteenth-century gender and class ideals in order to confer sympathy upon the working-class and endorse a Marxist awakening. By revealing the suffering of the working class, by showing that women are prevented from being ideal mothers because of their class, and by turning the entire working community of the factory into a family, Lumpkin argues that the proletarian worker is a member of the human community for whom reform is needed.

Similarly, in Chapter III, I analyze Josephine Johnson's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Now in November* (1934), as a proletarian sentimental novel that argues for working-class sympathy through the lens of the family. Set on the farm instead of in the factory, Johnson's novel is narrated from the perspective of the middle daughter who recounts her family's domestic and agricultural hardships, worrying over their survival and observing the ways that they are systemically prevented from achieving stability. The novel, like nineteenth-century sentimental texts, reorganizes the family around a feminine moral center and examines the consequences of gendered transgressions. *Now in November* advances a proletarian humanist argument by dismantling fundamental capitalist mythologies. Significantly, Johnson—like other women proletarian writers—reveals that outside forces affect what happens within the home, but rather than emphasizing men's traditionally violent response to this suffering, she creates a portrait of sentimental men who suffer over their inability to provide.

In Chapter IV, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) provides an example of the male sentimental proletarian novel, where I argue that Steinbeck portrays domestic caregiving as a necessary force for survival in an age when patriarchal, capitalist individualism has failed. Drawing on sentimental nostalgia for the home, Steinbeck expands the definition of family by broadening the boundaries of domestic space. By following the nomadic journey of the Joads as they are forced from their Oklahoma farm and create a new home each time they set up camp, Steinbeck turns the entire American landscape into the domestic realm. Further, by revealing the ways in which men as well as women serve as caregivers and develop kinship groups, Steinbeck brings men back into the home and crosses traditional gender boundaries to demonstrate that working-class survival is a human enterprise.

After exploring the ways in which proletarian literature adopts the sentimental mode, I transition to the genre of American neo-slave narratives. Beginning in Chapter V with *Jubilee* (1966), I argue that Margaret Walker's novel mimics the religious, emotional education of nineteenth-century sentimental novels. *Jubilee* suggests that African American suffering under slavery is part of a larger Christian destiny, and the protagonist, Vyry, develops a Christ-like philosophy of suffering, forgiveness, and redemptive love that provides agency through her acceptance of suffering. The novel is historical fiction, based upon the life and oral history of Walker's grandmother, so its epic scale and implied historical veracity signify a religious momentum to the narrative events, not just moving from slavery to freedom, but from ignorance to enlightenment in parallel with such figures as Moses, Christian from *Pilgrim's Progress*, and Ellen from *The Wide, Wide World*. Drawing upon a history of sentimentalism that connects suffering to moral redemption and places women at the center of a new world order, Walker draws the new, post-slavery world with an African American mother at its center. Only the

African American woman who suffers and embraces sentimental ideals, interpreting a Divine purpose from that suffering, is able to lead her family—and by extension her community—forward into peace and prosperity.

In Chapter VI, I examine Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), which departs from historical realism and adopts the genre of science fiction fantasy in order to shorten the distance between the past and the present. By doing so, *Kindred* directly links twentieth-century racial attitudes and cultural perspectives to their formation in slavery while also revealing the ways in which members of American society—both black and white—have developed a cultural amnesia that allows them to forget the origins of their beliefs as well as the humanity of their ancestors. Butler makes these choices to re-awaken sympathy for the enslaved and remind modern individuals of their shared humanity. As the protagonist, Dana, jumps back and forth between 1970s California and antebellum Maryland she learns to sympathize with her ancestors by direct experiences of suffering. Dana's shift in subjectivity—from observer of slavery to subject of slavery—confronts modern readers about their shared slave history and its ongoing legacy.

Finally, in Chapter VII, I discuss Toni Morrison's critique of sentimental sympathy in *Beloved* (1987). Morrison is able to render Sethe, a woman who killed her own daughter, as sympathetic precisely because this postmodern narrative reveals her obsessive focus on loving and protecting her children in alignment with sentimentalism's prioritization of the mother-child relationship. Sethe's acts are described as an extreme expression of sentimental motherhood, as she draws the boundaries of family through biology, affection, and action. Morrison also turns this critique of sympathy toward the African American community, pointing to problems of sympathy that inhibit them from overcoming or healing from their traumatic past. Although the novel does not advocate forgetting the past—as its emphasis on “rememory” and the return of

Beloved attest—the novel emphasizes that the ongoing suffering of those who have experienced trauma must be acknowledged and addressed in order for healing to occur. Even more important than why Sethe killed her daughter is the effect that killing has on her community and its members capacity to extend sympathy to her despite their inability to understand her choice. Morrison's novel questions whether or not a community can extend sympathy to those who have suffered *differently from them* and facilitate healing. The fractured community and the promise of its reconciliation offers a recognition of the limits of a sympathy that requires its recipients to experience continuous and homogenous forms of suffering.

CHAPTER 2

Standing Together, Side by Side: Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread*

...they are people, and the machines, they aren't human, and can't feel misery.
—Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread* (300)

*For so long each had been alone with his family
striving after enough food to keep from starving
Now they were going to stand together, side by side. . .*
—Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread* (333)

Published in 1932 and inspired by the events of the 1929 textile mill strikes in Gastonia, North Carolina,¹² Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread* was praised by reviewers as both a “beautiful and sincere novel” and “very good, very effective propaganda”(Vorse 104; Cantwell 327). In his critique of the novel, Roy Flanagan observes that “Miss Lumpkin writes well and honestly, and her book provides horrible but salutary instruction from beginning to end.”

Another reviewer in the *New York Times* defends Lumpkin against common criticisms leveled against proletarian writers for overly didactic methods by arguing that

It is the sort of propaganda novel to which no sneer can be legitimately attached—which is to say that its meaning rises out of people in dramatic conflict with other people and with the conditions of their life. At no point does the author underscore the issue; at no point does she take refuge in moralistic asides Here, she says, is this family; this is what happened to them when they were torn from their roots and set down in alien surroundings. (BR7)

¹² More commonly known as the Loray Mill Strike, The National Textile Workers Union (NTWU), a communist union, had hoped to establish a Southern stronghold and worked to organize several mills in Gaston County, North Carolina. The strikes lasted from April 1 to the end of September, 1929. The strike began at Loray Mill in Gastonia and grew to include the American Textile Mills in nearby Bessemer City. Clashes between strikers and law enforcement included mass violence at rallies and the tent cities that had been established when mill owners evicted striking mill workers from their company-owned housing. The strikes resulted in two prominent deaths: Police Chief Orville F. Aderholt and Ella May Wiggins, a white single mother of five who worked in the American Textile Mill, wrote protest ballads, and helped to organize female and African American workers to participate in the strike. For more historical background, see John A. Salmond, *Gastonia 1929: The Story of the Loray Mill Strike* (1995).

Robert Cantwell, the novelist who had called *To Make My Bread* “very effective propaganda,” concludes his review in *The Nation* by stating that “I cannot imagine how anyone could read it and not be moved by it” (372).

To Make My Bread follows the trials of the McClure family, and the first twenty-one chapters focus on their lives and community in the mountains of North Carolina. At the beginning of the novel Emma McClure gives birth to her daughter Bonnie and is left to raise four children with the help of only her aging father, Granpap Kirkland, because her husband has died only a few months before. Because he can provide little help on the farm, Granpap runs bootleg whiskey to earn some money, which occasionally lands him in trouble with the law. The McClures struggle through several difficult winters, barely surviving starvation and relying on credit at the local store. Emma and her neighbors are eventually persuaded to sell their houses and land to the storeowner, who promises they can still live in their homes for free. Sadly, those who have sold their land soon discover they have lost everything when Hal Swain sells the land to a sawmill that requires everyone to pay rent, which most can't afford. Unable to either find work or pay rent, the McClures move down the mountain to a town where they have heard they can make good money working in a textile mill.

At first, the McClures are pleased to be allotted a house by the mill, send the younger children to school, and work long shifts. Bonnie is left at home to raise the younger children while her mother and older siblings work. As the years pass, Bonnie grows up and witnesses the debilitating effects of working in the mills: her mother, aunt, and uncle are frequently ill and grow feeble but must continue working long hours. When of age, Bonnie and her brother John both go to work in the mill, and John befriends a worker who introduces him to left-leaning ideas. Bonnie, who marries and begins to have children, at first believes that hard work will

enable her to surpass Emma's achievements and gain a better life. She is shocked when the mill supervisor refuses her request to take unpaid breaks to nurse her newborn baby. Emma eventually dies of pellagra and exhaustion, and Bonnie loses a child to illness. Bonnie and John, who both become vocal critics of mill practices, call for reforms, helping to organize a strike. Bonnie—modeled after real-life millworker, strike leader, and balladeer Ella May Wiggins—writes popular protest songs and helps coordinate women's and African American participation in the strike. The mills evict people from their homes and raid strike headquarters, threatening further violence. Conflicts increase between strikers and deputies hired by the mills, while Bonnie and John remain important leaders in the strike. At the novel's close, Bonnie is murdered—shot while speaking at a rally. Bonnie's funeral draws crowds of millworkers, and John speaks at her grave about the injustice of her death and the cruel tyranny of the mill owners. As a final injustice, mill sympathizers “steal” Bonnie's children, forcing them into state care. As her brother John reads a newspaper account of the funeral that evening, he declares that that fight is not over: “This is just the beginning” (384).

As the *New York Times* reviewer notes, *To Make My Bread* represents “one more milestone on the road to the return of ‘social consciousness’ in American fiction” (BR7). While Lumpkin's ideologies reflect the 1930s tenets of social revolution promoted by the CPUSA and other leftist organizations of the period, her work participates in a much longer, larger tradition of women's social activist writing. The social consciousness that is built in the characters and community of *To Make My Bread* and modeled for the reader utilizes rhetorical structures, ideological tropes, and extensions of sympathy found in nineteenth-century sentimental novels, a genre which also relied heavily upon the domestic landscape and resulted in the sub-genre of the domestic novel. Adopting a narrative method that educates through sympathy, Lumpkin

develops a *bildungsroman* for her characters so that they gradually come to embrace leftist, radical ideologies as a result of their hardship-ridden experiences and their commitments to family and community. Embracing middle-class values that idealize a separation of public and private spaces while also upholding sentimentalized gender roles usually obstructs identification with the working-class. However, *To Make My Bread* encourages presumed middle-class readers to sympathize with working-class children, mothers, and families, educating the reader in communal fellowship and revolutionary ideology through unflinching but compassionate portrayals of their struggles to survive.

To Make My Bread both upholds and deconstructs sentimental ideals, critiquing working-class men's and women's inability to attain gender ideals because of their fight for survival. In proletarian sentimentalism, men and women fail to be "good men" and "good women" because they cannot inhabit their "proper," sentimentalized gender roles of good providers, protectors, mothers, and caretakers. The novels instead promote collective action as readers support the proletarians' rebellious acts against larger social forces. The sympathy developed for the characters as they struggle with class issues also crosses gender and race boundaries, showing readers the ways that the capitalist system denies these men and women the ability to fulfill particular roles and, therefore, be defined as men and women in traditional ways. Thus, when contemporary reviewers observed that *To Make My Bread* both "provides horrible but salutary instruction" and that no reader could fail to "be moved by it," they were picking up on the two key rhetorical aims of sentimental writing embedded in Lumpkin's text—to move and to instruct.

Lumpkin's adaptation of sentimentalism for proletarian literature may easily be seen as a deliberate extension of the gendered social consciousness found in leftist women's writings revision of the domestic novel. As Paula Rabinowitz has shown, radical women writers sought to

adapt realist proletarian forms that had become entrenched in a masculinized ideology. Women's proletarian writing linked the (feminized) domestic novel with the (masculinized) realist proletarian novel endorsed by CPUSA leadership and prominent literary editors like Gold:

Read as a genre, [women's] leftist fiction of the 1930s represents a curious revision of the realist domestic novel. Whereas the domestic novel maps the political through psychological disclosures about individual members of the bourgeois family, the proletarian novel overlays the contours of working-class consciousness and psychology onto the political organizations of culture and the workplace. (Rabinowitz 67)

Women writers who focused on female protagonists and on spaces outside of camps, mines, mills, and fields endeavored to make room for working-class women's experiences and to show the relationship between class and gender oppression as integral to radical ideology.

Proletarian women writers wrote about the effects of low wages on families' ability to provide shelter and purchase necessities. They wrote about cycles of abuse: those perpetuated by work supervisors and within families. They also described the experiences of women who worked in and outside of the home as well as women's sexual vulnerability and exploitation. In so doing, these writers showed that agriculture and manufacturing—the masculinized public sphere—were not and should not be the only sites for Marxist social reform. Leftist women writers revealed that what happened outside the home affected what happened within it. By breaking down the perceived barriers between the public and private spheres maintained by middle class ideologies, women proletarian writers created in their texts various domestic microcosms in which the racial, economic, and gender troubles of the outside world were translated into the domestic struggles of the home and family. However, Lumpkin's combination of the domestic novel and proletarian realist fiction capitalizes on more than the contours and structure of the domestic novel. By focusing on family life, the mother's plight, and the emotional education that brings her characters to revolutionary consciousness, Lumpkin not

only combines domestic and proletarian realist forms but also incorporates the sentimental rhetoric of nineteenth-century novels.

While Rabinowitz has convincingly shown that proletarian women's writing can be categorized as "a genre within a genre" that is primarily characterized by its revision of domestic fiction and proletarian realism, not all women's writing in this genre can be classified as sentimental in mode of rhetoric or operation (64). A sub-genre of proletarian writing may be established by examining the use of sentimental rhetoric and form, as certain texts appearing at the beginning of the 1930s not only used nineteenth-century sentimental forms but also anticipated—and perhaps influenced—Popular Front emphases on maternal activism that became significant later in the decade. These writers do more than just present working-class domestic scenes and cast the worker's body as both male and female, productive and reproductive, located in the factory and in the home. Drawing on earlier models of socially conscious writing that moves readers toward sympathy for the plight of the poor and oppressed, sentimental proletarians use gender ideals to reveal working-class vulnerability as well as instruct readers to be critical of the capitalist system through their compassion for the oppressed.

One of the stated dangers women proletariat writers faced in combining the domestic novel with realist fiction was potentially swinging the pendulum too far and presenting what Marxist readers and literary critics considered an over-feminized portrait. To write about female spaces or gendered concerns risked disqualifying their work from the (assumed ungendered) ranks of proletarian realism for not focusing critical attention on (masculinized) industrial or agricultural workspaces and the (male) worker's struggle. Leftist women wrote about the home in order to expand the realm of the working-class and included the home and the domestic as important components of revolutionary ideology, a place where reform was also needed.

However, domestic fiction is based upon—and is in fact credited with creating—an ideology that separates a public, masculinized workspace from a private, feminized home space. Writers who participated in revising a domestic fiction for proletarian aims struggled with the separation of these spaces, as the elision of the home was a necessary foundation for a mythology of working-class solidarity. If workers are to be united by their class status—as Marxism proposes—they must ignore gender and race nuances within the group, which meant that the Marxist “Worker” was assumed to be white and male. However, the “separate spheres” ideology and the ideology of working-class solidarity ignored the reality of working-class experience. The “separate spheres” ideology is a middle-class construction that helps to differentiate the middle-class, as only it had the economic resources to support a family with just one (father/husband) provider. Leftist women writers also sought to show that working-class women had different—and potentially opposing—needs from working-class men, particularly in relation to sexuality and the simultaneous burdens of caring for a family while also working outside the home. Women proletarian writers were also far more likely to address racial conflict, not only touching on the complex ways race affected social interactions within the working-class but also on the ways race became an instrument for division by capitalist supporters and, accordingly, how working-class racism engendered further oppression within the ranks of this “unified” group.

Thus, incorporating a literary form that promotes a middle-class ideology based upon particular gender, racial, and social roles—the domestic novel’s “separate spheres” ideology—for working-class women presents challenges for women writers who seek recognition within the (white, male, public) proletarian tradition. Texts that focus on female protagonists as well as on the home and family not only risk criticism for being overly feminized; they also reveal the potential ways in which working-class women do not meet society’s definition of proper women,

mothers, and wives, as established by the dominant middle class. In order to overcome the ideology that separates women from men and creates two distinct social and work spheres, Lumpkin turned to sentimentalism. By showing women at work in the home and then extending that work into the “male” space of industry, by equating in various ways the work of the factory and home, Lumpkin expands the domestic realm. In *To Make My Bread*, Lumpkin doesn’t just lend sentimental power to the workers’ plight; she makes the industrial workspace itself a sentimental zone. The workers of the factory are cogs in a machine and organs in a body: men and women work together in both domestic spaces and industrial spaces, and both places oppress them.

Following in the tradition of sentimental texts, *To Make My Bread* prioritizes affectional bonds throughout the novel, and the primary tragedy of the text is the separation of families and loss of community. Lumpkin’s text uses familiar sentimental tropes of vulnerable women (who experience the loss of male protector/providership), domesticity, death, and motherhood in order to attribute the loss of family and community directly to working-class hardships caused by the capitalist system. Linking the home and the workplace, Lumpkin reveals the ways in which members of the working-class community value affectional ties and are bonded by their experiences but threatened with separation by social institutions—such as the mill and the church—which oppress and shame working-class men and women. Thus, the text extends the sentimental community from the hearth into the factory and the strike zone, so that both men and women of *To Make My Bread* (and their sympathetic readers) come to a radical awareness through their tragedies and through their feelings.

Vulnerable Working-Class Women

Although *To Make My Bread* is a fictional account of the real-life events of the 1929 Gastonia textile mill strikes, Lumpkin chose not to focus the narrative entirely on workers in the mills, set the story only in the labor camps, or narrate from the perspective of a male millworker. Instead, she chose to begin the narrative prior to the trouble with the mills, telling the story of an Appalachian community representing those where many of the millworkers originated. Although the third-person narration follows various members of the McClure family and the Swain's Crossing community, the novel centers upon the experiences of Emma McClure and her children, Bonnie and John. While all three characters are significant to the text and its revolutionary message, this character triptych has the effect of magnifying Bonnie's importance because she serves as a balance and foil to both Emma, her mother, and John, her brother. To Emma, she is both witness to the suffering and hardships of motherhood and inheritor of her condition. To John, she is a matched set, the female embodiment of the working man's efforts to provide for the family and organize against the mill owners who represent capitalism's abuses. Through it all, Bonnie is a sentimental exemplar—at once the abandoned child, the vulnerable woman, the caring mother, the domestic economist, and the heroine who experiences emotional attachment and moral growth. She is the child, mother, and metaphoric slave in one body upon which a reader may confer sympathy for her plight and her actions.

After introducing the reader to the communal Appalachian landscape through a scene in which men exchange news about Emma at the local store, Lumpkin opens the novel with Bonnie's birth, heralding her as an important character. After standing in the doorway and calling into the blinding snow to guide Granpap and her sons to the house, Emma "felt a first sharp pain and knew that her time had come" (10). However, Granpap doesn't know how to help

Emma deliver her baby, and she must instruct him on what to do. Though Granpap is a poor assistant, Emma eventually gives birth to her daughter. The beginning of the text significantly places Emma in the doorway of the home, using spatial cues to signal her status as a transitional figure who will break gendered boundaries, serving as a prominent figure in both the domestic space and the public, masculinized space of the fields outside her door. Traditionally, two males fill the social roles of provider and protector for women in the domestic or sentimental model: the father, serving as the head of the family, and the husband, who takes over this role after marriage. Emma's husband never appears in the novel because he has already died and left the family vulnerable, while Granpap is shown blundering both outside—in the snowy fields—and inside Emma's home. Although well-intentioned, Granpap is not capable of serving as provider or protector. Emma, thus, has to act in the dual capacity of provider/protector and nurturer/caregiver. Lumpkin's novel not only begins in the tradition of sentimental texts that start with a female protagonist, abandoned by a traditional male protector; it also focuses on a mother as the central protagonist—carrying the proletarian novel's primary political message—and a transitional figure between the traditionally separated home and public spheres.

To Make My Bread is not just the story of the Gaston County strikes, nor is it the story of an Appalachian family who cannot survive in the mountains, turning hopefully to textile mills but finding instead disillusionment and suffering. *To Make My Bread* is essentially the story of mothers and children. The novel is focused primarily on Emma and Bonnie, with significant attention to Emma's sister-in-law Ora as well as an extension of the primary family. The novel narrates the experiences of two generations of women. In so doing, Lumpkin captures two crucial elements of the sentimental mode: 1) vulnerable women who must survive the hardships of their gendered, social circumstance; and 2) the development and prioritization of a kinship

network, which redefines the family according to affection. Not only do Emma's, Ora's, and Bonnie's anguished attempts to protect and provide for their children develop reader sympathy for mothers who care so much and work so hard only to accomplish so little, but it undergirds Lumpkin's argument about the injustices of a social system that would make supporting children impossible while judging these women for their failures. Women who are unable to provide for their children are considered to be bad mothers who have made poor emotional, moral, and economic choices. Lumpkin shifts the sentimental critical lens to the economic system to reveal that working-class women are vulnerable in ways similar to middle-class women and to show that they, too, embrace the ideals of loving and caring for their children. However, *To Make My Bread* illustrates the ways in which working-class women are prevented from achieving those ideals by the very social system that promotes them.

In Bonnie, Lumpkin draws a child who witnesses her mother's suffering but, when she grows up, believes that she can somehow do better for her own children—can find a way out of the cycle. This is the narrative of capitalism and of the middle class. Bonnie, however, is caught by a system of oppression that forces her to repeat the same suffering as had her mother. Bonnie, too, is abandoned by her husband, although he is first injured in a mill accident and unable to find steady work. Like Emma, she must take full responsibility for her children, as well as an extended network of family members, while she labors at a job that debilitates her and pays little. Lumpkin draws a cyclical narrative of suffering as Emma—and eventually Bonnie—loses every vestige of financial security, every dream of prosperity and health for their children; the women are crushed by a cycle of ceaseless labor and mounting debt. Lumpkin, in effect, dismantles fundamental capitalist faiths that promote the idea that hard work enables everyone to achieve economic stability and success, critiquing themes introduced by such literary naturalists of the

1890s as Crane, Norris, and Dreiser as well as “rags to riches” author Horatio Alger.

Not So Sweet Home: Danger in the Domestic Sphere

To Make My Bread's opening scene at the McClure's isolated Appalachian cabin immediately undercuts the ideology of the domestic haven that is frequently linked to sentimentalism and middle-class beliefs about familial relationships. As Emma calls out into the blizzard to her father and sons, trying to guide them in from the fields: “She could not stand long against the strong wind. It blew her against the wall of the cabin with the force of a strong man's fist. Leaning over she held to the woodblock that served as a step and kept up intermittent screams until the others returned” (10). The strength of the wind not only demonstrates the indifferent power of nature, but the comparison between the blowing wind that pushes Emma against the cabin to “the force of a strong man's fist” adds masculinized menace to the supposed safety of the home. It critiques the protection that men are assumed to provide for women who are confined to the home space and reveals Emma's vulnerability: her home is a place of refuge but it is not unassailable. Through the strong storm, men's strength becomes as capricious as the forces of nature: that strength can be used to protect, but it can also be turned to violence against women inside those homes. Emma can scream to guide others to the house, but she can do little to resist or stop the power that assails her.

Emma is reminded of the home's vulnerability when her son's wife, Minnie, begins to carry on an affair with a neighbor whenever Kirk McClure is away. Emma had suspected Minnie's unfaithfulness during her son's long absences, but she is shocked when Sam McEachern begins to call. One day, Sam and Minnie get up and leave the cabin: “Those two were over in the other room under Kirk's roof. And she knew. She was Kirk's kin, and it was a

McClure roof” (104). The sanctity of the home is not enough to prevent Sam from seducing Minnie, nor is Emma’s presence enough to shame them from having sex in the family home. Emma, having kept the knowledge of Sam’s visits from her son, determines to put an end to this behavior, so she picks up Granpap’s gun and waits for them to return to the main part of the cabin. Emma tells Minnie, “I don’t aim to hurt ye” because her goal is protection, not harm; she wants to protect her son’s reputation, the relationship, and the McClure home (105). In response, Sam pulls out a revolver, insisting “I ain’t done anything.” After staring Emma down, Sam eventually walks off, declaring that “[a] man can’t fight a woman.” However, Sam has violated the home—both literally and morally—and he presents a serious threat to Emma because he is willing to harm her for personal benefit; he later follows through on his threat of violence when he ambushes and murders Kirk.

In *To Make My Bread*, men outside of the family are not the only threats to women or to the safety of the home. Often, men’s despair and frustration over their failure to provide ends in emotional or literal abandonment; they avoid the home and its responsibilities. The novel links the relationship between men’s anger outside the home with violence within it, while also showing that abandonment can result from an inability to cope with feelings. When Granpap and Emma’s two oldest sons, Kirk and Basil, are unable to bring home rabbits, they would rather avoid coming home at all than face Emma. Although failing to provide food for the family endangers their well-being, abandonment is a more serious overall threat to the security of the family. By choosing to avoid witnessing the pain they feel is caused by their failures to provide, men who abandon their families risk inflicting deeper injury upon those they love.

Similarly, John, Bonnie’s brother, is ashamed by the visible physical toll the millwork takes on the women:

He looked into her eyes and saw on her face that had been so full of grace and fineness, a sickliness, a beginning of wearing out—the lines that in another ten years would make her like an old woman He touched Emma's hand and turned away, strained and impotent. There was an impulse in him to pick up the gun, kill them all, and then himself. The impulse passed, but he was trembling when Bonnie came and stood before him at the door leading to the porch. (297)

John considers violence against the very family he wishes to protect, projecting his frustrations and desperation onto the people he loves. After Bonnie's husband loses his hand and is unable to find work, he becomes abusive toward the children before eventually leaving entirely. Bonnie "was almost glad something had made him leave her. It was not his fault that he had become worthless she gradually came to hope that he would find a life away from her" (322). Although Bonnie is magnanimous, it is a relief when Jim leaves because he removes the threat of violence his presence creates.

The novel acknowledges that while there are good men, women are always at risk of danger because men are the ones who decide how they are to be treated. Ora tells Emma "[a] man is a danger to every good woman and she's got to know it A danger to every woman good or bad. I tell my Sally to look on men that they're deadly as rattlesnakes" (94). Although Ora refers to men's sexual desire and the risks of extramarital sex, her use of the words "danger" and "deadly" implies a risk of violence.¹³ When Emma defends the "good men" she knows, who Ora points out are husbands, Emma observes that she might have been willing "if Jim had 'awanted to take advantage before we was married" but that once they were "he was kind *for a man*. I would a'done anything he said. If he'd a'told me to put my hand in the fire and hold it there I think I would a 'done it. But he never did" (94, emphasis mine). Jim's kindness is notable,

¹³ *To Make My Bread* reveals that women are not protected from sexual danger even within the home. Young Frank, Ora's son, sexually harasses and molests Bonnie while the two families are living together. After Frank is forced to leave school and begin working in the mill, he swears that he will go "to the devil as fast as I can" (208). Shortly thereafter, he begins following Bonnie around: "Sometimes he found her in a room by herself, and backing her into a corner, would try to touch her leg under her dress. And even in the dark when she was undressing for bed in the room she felt his eyes staring at her trying to make her out...Whatever it was he made the whole place uncomfortable for her" (228).

but it is marked by his lack of violence rather than emotional connection. Significantly, too, Emma acknowledges that Jim had the power to command her to do acts of violence to herself; although Emma attributes this power to love, it also signifies the type of mastery a man can maintain over a wife in a marriage and home, making decisions for her benefit or harm depending on his will.

Men, however, are not the only ones who become a threat to the home as a result of frustration and despair. *To Make My Bread* also reveals the depths of misery working-class women feel as failed mothers and how the extreme deprivations of poverty can lead to the loss of emotional connection with their children, making them numb to anything but survival. Although the women love their children, in the face of extreme hardship, they can—like men—direct their anger toward those who are the victims rather than those who cause the suffering. For some mothers, the stress of caring for their homes and children, while providing income and food, places them in danger of losing the emotional connection that sentimental ideals assume all mothers must feel for their children. When Granpap leaves home to run whiskey, Emma directs her worry at her children: “Emma knew the risks Granpap was running and each time he left the cabin for his journey she became weary and cross. For the smallest reason she threatened John with a hickory. Or she said to Bonnie, ‘I’ll slap ye over.’ She never carried out her threats, but they made the cabin an uncomfortable place” (14). Similarly, after a period of near-starvation, Emma finally receives a small amount of food to cook: “Her eyes glistened as she looked at the food. Before they had shone with a cold hard spark. Now they glistened warmly. She looked at the children warmly. For the last two days she had almost hated them, because she could do nothing to help them in their misery” (31).

Emma’s helplessness leads to anger, and like the men’s, it is misdirected at those she fails

to care for. However, because she is a woman and a mother whose role more heavily emphasizes caretaking and de-emphasizes power over others, *To Make My Bread* reveals the ways in which this anger paralyzes working-class women and results in an emotional disconnection from their families and their communities. When her oldest sons begin feuding with each other, Emma is frustrated by their poor decisions and saddened by their selfishness. She still loves them, but she is hurt by Basil's indifference and Kirk's sexuality: "Inside her there was unquiet. It was like winds that blew from the north and the south at the same time The warm feeling struggled with the cold until Emma felt as if a storm had struck her and torn up her roots, so that she was lying helpless, like a tree on the side of a mountain" (92). Emma won't leave because she is rooted in the home and family, but she is unable to change her sons or improve her family's condition, resulting in anger against her sons and then emotional paralysis.

It is unusual for a text which relies so much on sympathy through motherhood to reveal that a mother "almost hated" her children or that she felt paralyzed by them. Emma, however, does not act on her impulses and abuse her children; instead, she holds her anger inside, feeling torn between her love and her frustration, suffering over her inability to care for her family. Her anger is largely directed inward instead of outward. By showing the flaws and failures of these mothers, Lumpkin criticizes a system that holds women accountable for maintaining economic and emotional stability within their families while placing that stability entirely out of their reach. At one point, Emma and Ora walk through an upper-class section of town and see the mansions in which the mill owners live. A liveried servant pushes a carriage into the garden, and the two women wonder if the silver goblet and spoon—for which a collection had been taken among the workers—is in the carriage with the baby. The workers were obliged to sacrifice necessities in order to provide a gift to the already wealthy:

“I gave ten cents, and had to tell Bonnie to wait for a tablet till the next week.”
“Frank gave a quarter for both of us...” (222)

Reflecting on the encounter, Ora tells Emma “Hit’s funny . . . how some have such fine, pretty things and others not . . . right after we left hit, I started feeling s’ mad. Mad at everything and at nothing, because my babies couldn’t have a thing” (227). Anger is not a traditionally acceptable female emotion; Lumpkin develops maternal anger as a natural result of the frustrations of the women’s situations.

Over the course of the novel, Lumpkin develops a sentimental *bildungsroman* so that these failures eventually lead to an anger that is properly projected by the characters—and by the reader—toward the system that has placed these families in their vulnerable and pitiable situations: the mills and the capitalist system that empowers them. Emma and Ora are portrayed as women who are the natural products of a system that destroys maternal and familial connection, but Bonnie is the sentimental hero who will carry the proletarian message from maternal suffering to revolutionary action, teaching others to embrace her views. Bonnie witnesses Emma’s suffering and suffers as a mother herself. However, instead of experiencing emotional disconnection from her children, the death of her baby fully awakens Bonnie to the injustices of their situation. Thus, Bonnie transfers her anger to the mill owners: the mill owners don’t let her take breaks to nurse her children, the mill owners don’t pay her enough to buy nutritious food, the mill owners allow people to work in unhealthy, unsafe conditions. Bonnie sees that other working women experience the same difficulties and sympathizes with their suffering. Speaking at a union rally, Bonnie directly connects her motherhood to her activism:

Friends . . . I am the mother of five children. One of them died because I had t’ work in the mill and leave the baby only with my oldest child who was five and didn’t know how to tend it very well. And with four left I have found it hard t’ raise them on the pay I get. I couldn’t do for my children any more than you women on the money we get. That’s why I have come out for the union, and why we’ve all got t’ stand for it. (345).

One of the enticements the mill company provides to its workers is “free housing,” but the cost of this housing is the mill’s ownership of the people who live there. The company promises improved housing over the mountain cabins: “you get a house with windows and cook on a real stove,—no more bending over a chimney” (39). But, as Granpap counters, “the house ain’t your own . . . Nor the land,” land which under a capitalist system symbolizes freedom and independence. Workers’ homes are often overcrowded because in lieu of rent (or in exchange for low rent), the mills require a minimum number of full-time workers to reside in each house. Low wages often force families to combine households, and the company coerces families to live together so that enough working adults meet the mill requirement to obtain a house. Thus, family arrangements frequently shift as death or other changes in family structure threaten their ability to stay in a house.¹⁴ Supervisors also intrude upon family arrangements by controlling whether children stay in school if the family doesn’t have enough working adults.

Owners of the mills not only control occupancy of the homes, they also intrude on parenting decisions and violate the home’s assumed autonomy, protection, and refuge. When John gets in a fight at school with the mill superintendent’s son, his teacher sends word that he must apologize or be whipped in order to be allowed back. Emma sympathizes with John’s refusal to apologize, but she explains “[w]e’ve got to do what the higher-ups say Down here hit’s what they say that counts” (217). John’s rebellion not only puts his own future at risk, but

¹⁴ Emma and Ora’s families initially live together until Granpap buys a farm off company property and asks Emma to move her family there with him. Ora and Frank move into a different mill house, and one of their older daughters stays home from school to care for the young children. Bonnie marries Jim Calhoun, and they live in Granpap’s farm house until Jim leaves for the war and the walk between the farm and mill grow too far for Bonnie, so she moves back to a house in the village with her brother John and Emma. Granpap eventually loses the farm, Jim returns home and works in the mill, Emma dies of pellagra, and John marries Zinie Martin and they live with Bonnie and Jim. Granpap passes away and Zinie’s brother-in-law is killed in an accident, which “forced John and Zinie to break up the house with Bonnie, for Jennie needed them to help with money” (316-17). Jim leaves Bonnie, who can no longer afford her company house, so she moves her children to a cabin off company property that had “been lived in by colored people” (317).

he also exposes his entire family. Emma is told to send a note testifying that she has punished her son, and although she doesn't whip him, her cross on the paper signifies that she acknowledges the mill supervisor's power to insist on John's punishment. Thus, by controlling their jobs, their schooling, and their homes, factory owners maintain the power to order "corrective" violence within the private life of a family.

Mill owners also use the threat of eviction, but once workers begin to organize and strike in favor of labor unions, they make this threat a reality. As tensions escalate and threats no longer work, supervisors begin to evict strikers and their families: "they felt the power . . . men went to the houses of those who had not gone back into the mill, emptied them of furniture, and locked the doors of their own homes against them" (353). The safety of the home is shown to be an illusion unless one has the financial resources to remain completely independent, a situation that is within reach of only the upper classes—even members of the middle class are subject to home mortgages. After being forced to sell the homes and land they had previously owned to pay for food, workers realize that company housing is not so much a form of labor compensation as it is a tool of capitalist control.

The cycle of labor in the factory and work in the home takes a toll within the domestic realm. In sentimental literature, housework is presented as, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon argues, a "moral and aesthetic endeavor," one that is guided by "free will, love, and desire rather than by material need or compulsion" (510, 509). However, *To Make My Bread* emphasizes that housework is based not only in material need but—when combined in a cycle of unrelenting work outside of the home—downright exhausting. Under these circumstances, the home cannot serve as a private space of moral uplift, nor can it buffer workers against outside demands. In Swain's Crossing, families engaged frequently in public and private interactions, gathering at the

store to gossip, helping families build sheds and cabins, and visiting each others' homes for dances, quilting circles, and tending the ill. Although material needs are present in these events, the emotional connection established overshadows the labor and becomes the focus.

This sense of family linkage and communal relationship, however, is fractured by the move to town. Although the working families live in the same neighborhood and share a common Appalachian background, they lose the ability to connect with each other. Prevented as they are from bonding in the weave and the spool rooms, they are too tired and burdened with too much additional work at home to establish communal connections outside the factory. Emma and Ora carefully prepare their house for visitors by hanging a picture in the front room "where everyone could look at it while they sat" and putting a family Bible on display (201). However, few visitors ever come: "Everyone seemed busy with his own household, especially the women. There was plenty to do at home, without gallivanting to other people's houses." *To Make My Bread* suggests that certain kinds of work can have both a material purpose and an affective result. The sentimental tragedy of the capitalist system, however, is that it fractures these bonds, prevents workers from developing kinship systems that enable community, and pushes men and women beyond their physical and emotional limits.

Tragic Mothers: The Mill Mothers' Lament

Although twentieth-century cultural norms continued to embrace a universal, feminine standard of a contained domestic sphere, it reflected largely a middle-class social ideal. In effect, it excluded working-class women. Not only did working-class households usually require the incomes provided by both husbands and wives in order to survive, but this cultural view maintained a racial divide: the United States' history of slavery and discrimination meant that

women of color were not included in the domestic sphere ideology. After Emancipation, throughout Restoration, the Jim Crow era, and decades of economic practices that advantaged whites economically, non-white families could rarely achieve the middle-class prosperity that allowed for single provider families.¹⁵ Because of domestic cultural ideals based on the sentimental Cult of True Womanhood, both working-class and non-white women were viewed as less feminine, women who did not achieve their full potential as women, due to moral failures rather than to economic ones.

In writing about working-class women and economic or racial troubles, proletarian women writers such as Lumpkin risked emphasizing this divide and losing the sympathy of their readers. By focusing on the ways in which working-class women could not live up to the demands of idealized motherhood, they hazarded appealing to a middle-class reader's appreciation of traditional gender roles and highlighting the differences between those readers and the working-class women of the text. Showing the ways in which their lives were laborious, and, at times, tragic, risked adding to stereotypes of the working class. However, Lumpkin often drew upon sentimentalized views of motherhood in order to build common feeling with readers and create opportunities to show how the class system—and not moral failures—made it

¹⁵ George Lipsitz, in *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, outlines the ways in which policies adopted long after the emancipation of slaves in the 1860s economically and socially advantage whites by pitting minorities against each other, specifically reserving benefits and work protections for whites, destroying affordable minority housing, and maintaining de facto segregation. Lipsitz points out such policies as the New Deal Era Wagner Act and Social Security Act, which excluded farm workers and domestics from coverage, “effectively denying those disproportionately minority sectors of the work force protections and benefits routinely afforded whites” (5). The 1934 Federal Housing Act brought home ownership within reach of millions of citizens “but overtly racist categories in the Federal House Agency’s (FHA) ‘confidential’ city surveys and appraisers’ manuals channeled almost all of the loan money toward whites and away from communities of color.” Similarly, northern trade unions were segregated, so gains in pensions, insurance, and job security were awarded to whites “who formed the overwhelming majority of the unionized work force.” For additional studies on the economic impact of segregation and race policy in the U.S., see Gary M. Anderson and Dennis Halcoussis, “The Political Economy of Legal Segregation: Jim Crow and Racial Employment Patterns” (1996); Shirley Cable and Tamara L. Mix, “Economic Imperatives and Race Relations: The Rise and Fall of the American Apartheid System” (2003); Donald Tomaskovic-Devey and Vincent J Roscigno, “Racial Economic Subordination and White Gain in the U.S. South” (1996).

impossible for working-class women to meet these standards. These mothers were sentimental precisely because they felt the same as their middle-class counterparts: they loved their children and wished to provide good care for them; they longed to meet domestic ideals but tragically failed, resulting in their shame and leading eventually to their activism.

To Make My Bread relies on the belief that women who have children would prefer to devote their energies to caring for them—a sentimental ideal—while also challenging the view that women who work outside the home are somehow selfish, choosing a career over caring for their children. It emphasizes repeatedly that working-class women are, in fact, providing for their children by working outside the home. As Emma says, “I wanted so much, Ora, t’ give my young ones a chance in life and see them have things that children should have. But I have made only misery and unhappiness for myself and them” (307). The problem is not a lack of love: “Loving was as natural to [Bonnie] as the breath she took into herself without thought, so she had a child every year. To them she gave every care she could” (315). The need for outside labor causes mothers to sacrifice their physical well-being as well as the time they would prefer to spend with their families. In *To Make My Bread*, Emma’s love for her children is shown primarily through the way she provides for them, re-defining feminine, maternal love as that which *also* provides: a working-class mother does not have the luxury of serving only as an affection-giver or a moral guide. This type of caretaking is a necessity of circumstance, while a mother’s emotional and physical resources are consumed by the efforts devoted to helping her family survive.

Emma’s labor on the farm is treated as part of the same continuum as her labor in the home; the text refuses to divide farm work from domestic labor. Her work supplements the (small amounts of) meat and cash supplied by her father and older sons. Emma moves

seamlessly between her labor outside and inside the home: “Emma walked about the clearing and the cabin, helping Bonnie and John [pick potatoes], and making supper” (92). Thus, her external labor complements the traditional women’s role of cooking, cleaning, and caregiving as part of a holistic endeavor to survive. The loss of the farm prompts Emma’s decision to move the family to town where she can work in the textile mills, but she is swayed as well by a factory recruiter’s assurance that the children can attend “a fine city school” (136). Emma hopes that the promised high wages and housing will not only result in a stable supply of food, but that her children will have the opportunity to receive an education and be able to achieve more in their own lives. When Granpap hopes they might return to the hills, Emma insists “I’d want the young ones to have schooling” (137). She chooses to work in the mill because she anticipates that it will result in a better life for her children.

Emma hopes that she can achieve a balance between working outside the home and caring for her children within it, but she quickly discovers that millwork leaves her exhausted: “It was like a circle . . . If she didn’t rest, she didn’t work, and if she couldn’t work, they couldn’t eat, and if she couldn’t eat, she couldn’t work” (245). She works the night shift, alternating with Ora’s days so that someone will always be home. But Emma finds she does not have the strength to work twelve hours in the spooling room and still be with her children:

She could not see the young ones as often as she liked. At first she had tried to stay awake in the mornings to talk with Bonnie and John. This meant the loss of two good hours of sleep. Now, on coming home she went to the bed, still warm from Bonnie’s sleeping there During the day she must keep herself awake to look after Ora’s youngest. When Bonnie got home about two she could sleep again. Then at five she must have supper, get her lunch, and start out for the long night. (213)

Once she becomes an adult, Bonnie too finds it impossible to balance working outside the home with caring for her children. She rises each morning at four to cook breakfast, leaving it on the stove for her children to eat when they wake. Leaving them “regretfully,” she worries throughout

her workday, afraid that “a flame from the chimney might set fire to the house” or that “some accident had happened to one of them” (317). By the end of her shift, the exhausted woman walks home slowly, but her fear spurs her to walk faster, running the closer she gets to the house: “Only when she came just outside the cabin and heard their voices in the room, talking naturally, could her fears calm down.” By illustrating Bonnie’s anxiety, Lumpkin reveals that she feels torn between the ways in which she must provide for her children. Although she fails to meet the sentimental ideal in that she must leave them to fend for themselves while she works (in potential danger), Bonnie is not a mother who neglects her children; instead, she is a mother who has no other options. Like so many other women of the working-class, Bonnie has no one to help her; traditional gender roles are in place so firmly that only women can combine the responsibilities of both working and domestic caretaking. Although her husband is injured, he does not stay home to care for the children.

These working-class women must work to support their families because men alone cannot earn enough. According to Marxist ideology, this is a failure of the capitalist system—a man should be able to sustain a family with his income. According to sentimental gender ideals, this deficiency instead means that a woman’s provider has failed her and her family, which is a failure of his morality (and his masculinity). As proletarian literature, Lumpkin’s text, however, critiques the system that causes masculine providership to fail, altering what it means to be a “mother” in the working class. Lumpkin develops a sentimental proletarian argument by emphasizing the suffering of these mothers and building upon the sympathy this suffering creates. While living in the Appalachian mountains, Emma not only suffers to a degree that only mothers with the responsibility of managing household resources can understand, but the evidence prompting this concern—witnessed through such daily domestic activities as cooking

meals—is unseen, unknowable by the male provider of the family: “Emma caught her breath. Granpap could not understand how they needed money for food. A man did not watch the meal get lower in the bag and wonder where money for the next lot would come. He didn’t see the slab of fatback get smaller until there was just a greasy end left for boiling with cabbage. And then no more” (23).

Emma watches the evidence of her failures mount, feeling misery at her helplessness while she watches her children starve:

Emma watched the young ones grow thinner There was nothing for her to do but watch. Her eyes were bright like small kerosene lamps with reflectors behind them. And the lamps gleamed out at the children and at Granpap and the boys when they came from the woods. She was ready and waiting to get up and cook whatever they brought in. But they brought nothing. (29)

Lumpkin displaces criticism from Emma for failing to meet domestic ideals onto outside forces that make meeting them impossible, focusing instead upon her suffering. Bonnie, too, works to stretch her meager resources, suffering over her inability to economize enough to provide basic necessities for her children:

She made many figures at night on scraps of paper trying to work out a way to make the money go further than it seemed able to do. There were so many items:—rent, kerosene, life insurance like all the rest, she had very little left for food and clothing. And the children, dressed almost in rags, looked pale in spite of all she tried to do. (323-24)

According to sentimental standards, Emma and Bonnie fail as mothers: their children are poorly dressed and poorly fed. They lack formal education because—despite the promises of the recruiters and the availability of “free” schooling—books are expensive and most children must leave school to enter the mills at a young age. Children are frequently sick, and it is common among the workers for their children to die because of lack of proper nutrition or healthcare. However, despite all of these failures, Emma and Bonnie—and by extension, all of the women in

the mill—become objects of sympathy because of their anguish over their children and their strong desire to overcome these obstacles. They are not unlike Ruth Hall in their lack of resources and their need to break gendered boundaries to provide for their children; unlike Ruth Hall, however, they lack the education and social station to enter a genteel profession that pays them a living wage and sustains a middle-class existence.

Although she had witnessed Emma’s struggles to support her family, Bonnie at first believes in the capitalist myth of hard work as the way out of destitution. She begins in the middle-class position of blaming the worker for being unable to work hard enough or manage well enough to escape the deprivations of poverty:

“Our young ones will have things better,” Bonnie often thought to herself, and she did not mean to sit down and expect the good things to come. She must work for them. She thought with pity of Emma lying sick in the front room. Emma had wanted good things, but somehow had not managed right—and neither had Granpap who worked so hard on the farm and got in the end only feebleness and discouragement. She and Jim, young and happy, could do anything. (275)

Bonnie doesn’t recognize the forces beyond the individual or see the cycle of poverty, replicating a middle-class viewpoint that places blame on personal actions and achievements rather than acknowledging a system that inhibits individual attainment.

The refusal of her manager to let her take unpaid nursing breaks not only triggers Bonnie’s first awareness of the ways in which the capitalist system limits individual achievement, but that other women are subject to the same pressures. Rejecting her appeal, the supervisor tells her “[i]f I let you . . . I’d have to let every other woman who’s got a young baby do the same. And there are plenty of babies in this village” (283). Bonnie replies, “And plenty of them dies.” Although shocked at the refusal of her “good and natural” request, Bonnie realizes that asking for this concession to working motherhood also puts her at risk for losing her job, that suggesting any change to the system could result in severe consequences: “[s]he was frightened

by her own words, and waited for days afterwards, watching for someone to come up, while she worked at the machines, lay his hand on her shoulder and say, ‘You can’t work here any more’” (283-84).

Traditionally, women are supposed to take care of their families; they are also expected to be able to rely on an extended network of families for help, as women assist other women with caretaking. The mill suggests that working women should make private arrangements among themselves, refusing to recognize the gaps in support that are created when all mothers must work and no families can spare adults to full-time caretaking. Unable to stay home, Bonnie looks to her family for help but that assistance is unstable, constantly changing due to deaths and financial shifts. At first, she leaves her baby in a basket next to Emma’s sickbed. After Emma’s death, Bonnie combines households with her newly married brother, but John and Zinie move in with another relative whose husband dies. Left to care for her children alone, Bonnie must find smaller, cheaper housing and leaves five-year-old Emma in charge of the younger children.

Despite Bonnie’s fears, it is not an accident but illness that kills one of her children. Upon receiving word that her child is ill, she hurries home, “stumbling on the road,” feeling as though the very fields are thwarting her: “The broomstraw, weak as it was, seemed to hold her back, and she pushed her way through as if it was a wall that she must break down” (319). She arrives too late:

She hurried to the bed . . . The child was still. In her arms he lay without moving, but she had seen that his eyes were open. She shook him almost angrily, then held him close to her face. His lips touched her cheek, but there was no breath coming from his half open mouth. Then she had to accept what she had really known when she took him up. There was no life in him. She laid him down on the bed and turned to the other young ones. (320)

Bonnie was physically parted from the child by her work at the mill before the permanent separation that comes through the child’s death. In attempting to rush to her child’s side, even the

fields—representative of agricultural workspaces—hold her back. Because the baby is dead when she arrives, there is nothing Bonnie can do to save her child. His death is a result of larger, institutional factors such as poor diet, lack of medicine, and a lack of proper supervision. She holds him as a tender gesture of love and shakes him “almost angrily” hoping to wake him up, but the gesture also reveals her frustration that she cannot save him—it is “almost” angry because she would not harm her child, but it is “angry” because she believes the death was preventable. She has to “accept what she had really known when she took him up,” yielding to the knowledge that her son is dead but also that working under her conditions results all too often in child deaths.

Bonnie turns to her other children because she has others to care for; however, Lumpkin subtly indicates that this death is a turning point that will become the foundation for Bonnie’s revolutionary consciousness. Bonnie’s turn to her children is a symbolic recognition that there are other children who can be saved. As Gillian Brown points out, the loss of life is important in sentimental texts because “[d]eath or some form of escape enables homecomings and family reunions. As much as divine love and maternal care, death generates the domestic economy that maintains family unity” (33). The death of Bonnie’s child spurs her alignment with proletarian beliefs and her activism on behalf of mothers and children. In her later protest songs and speeches, Bonnie cites the death of her child and the potential losses for all mothers who work. By situating this moment of loss as a site of realization, Lumpkin combines ideals of family unity with Marxist philosophies of social equality.

Bonnie is frustrated at her inability to earn enough money to provide for her family, but she’s aware that her experience is not unique. When she writes the pro-union ballad, “Mill Mother’s Lament” (voicing the real-life song written by Ella May Wiggins), she expresses the

shared frustrations of working-class mothers:

We leave our homes in the morning.
We kiss our children good-by.
While we slave for the bosses
Our children scream and cry.

How it grieves the heart of a mother
You every one must know.
But we can't buy for our children;
Our wages are too low.

* * *

But for us nor them, dear workers,
The bosses do not care... (345-46)

Bonnie's song speaks to the "heart of a mother" and women's shared grief. Furthermore, the crime of the mill bosses is that they "do not care" about either the women or their vulnerable children. The children's screaming and crying is both a representation of normal children's behavior—they cry when parted from their mothers—and a result of their starvation and neglect; it is also a representation of the abuse the women suffer as the "slave" inside the mills. But, the song continues, the bosses "fear" a union, so the workers should stand together and "have a union here" (346). Thus, Bonnie transforms children's and mothers' suffering into a moment of sympathetic connection, one which inspires action—that of joining a union. The implication is that this union of feeling will become a union of political views and a literal labor union; shared feeling thus becomes an education toward political action.

Crossing From Class to Race

The use of sentimental sympathy in *To Make My Bread* allows Lumpkin to extend radical awareness across race boundaries, incorporating a critique of racism that is frequently omitted from male-authored proletarian texts. Many proletarian novels written by white authors in the 1930s and 1940s avoided a critical treatment of race. They often relegated racism to the words

and actions of the bourgeois and their allies (such as in works by Robert Cantwell, Myra Page, and Jack Conroy) or by ignoring race altogether (as in writing by John Steinbeck and Michael Gold). A few authors did offer a somewhat more complex view of American racial politics by placing a racist antihero at the center of the story (as in works by James T. Farrell and Nelson Algren). However, women writing proletarian fiction did not see race, gender, and class as discrete subject positions, and often wrote about connections among the forms of oppression experienced by individuals who identified with various (and/or multiple) categories.

After first establishing that within the working-class community, whites discriminate and hold negative views of African Americans—therefore dividing members of the working-class against themselves—Lumpkin capitalizes on the shared experience of suffering working-class motherhood to cross racial boundaries. Lumpkin establishes a cultural history of racial tension through Granpap's Confederate past, both through his extreme efforts to attend a Confederate memorial parade and in his war-time reminiscence about stealing a piece of cornbread from “a little nigger” while he was scouting: “snot was running from the little nigger's nose on the bread. But Granpap hadn't eaten a thing for two days. He took the bread away from the little nigger and ate it. And it was the best meal, he said, he ever had” (86). Granpap utterly lacks remorse for stealing bread from a starving child because he was also starving, and he doesn't see the child as anything but a “nigger.” The anecdote also implies the ways whites in Granpap's position often view themselves in competition for resources with African Americans—one group can survive only by taking from the other. Granpap later expresses exactly this view when looking for work in the mill town. When he can find no work cutting wood or tending gardens because “this sort of work was done by the black men,” Granpap complains: “If hit wasn't for niggers . . . I could get work; but they want niggers, because the black man charges less than the white” (201).

Ignoring other realities—such as Granpap’s refusal to work for lower wages, his age and infirmity, and African American’s inability to demand higher wages—Granpap instead blames African Americans as a group for his own troubles rather than seeing connections between his and their social and economic positions.

Although other members of the McClure family are not portrayed as overtly racist—rarely coming in contact with non-whites in the Appalachian mountains—they learn racist ideologies from Granpap and from other workers in the more diverse mill town. Granpap passes on his racist views when the family first arrives. Hot and thirsty from their journey, the family passes through neighborhoods on their way to the mill; Bonnie asks if she can drink water from an African American woman’s bucket. Emma gives permission and asks if Granpap would mind if they rested at the house since the woman “seems real friendly” (144). When Granpap curtly orders the children back, Emma hesitates until Granpap says: “They’re niggers, Emma White and black don’t mix.” Granpap explains the concept of separation, teaching Emma about racial difference. Conflicted, Emma wants to thank the woman for her help, but feels pressured by Granpap to stay silent. However, the effects of Granpap’s “teaching” are quickly evident, revealing the ways racist ideologies are passed from generation to generation. When John is called back, he senses something is wrong and asks, “What is it?” Emma responds

“They’re niggers,” she told John, and turned to follow the sledge. John went back to Bonnie. “They’re niggers,” he said and looked contemptuously over his shoulder at the group of black young ones who stood by the pump staring after them. (144)

Although Bonnie doesn’t ask, John shares what he has learned, passing along this newly acquired perspective. He had no problem drinking from the water pump with the other children, but John quickly acquires contempt for them because he has heard the derogatory term “nigger” and witnessed Granpap’s attitude toward those whom he has labeled.

As a way to overcome mill segregation—white workers and African American workers historically worked in separate mills and lived in different neighborhoods, so the few African Americans who worked in the “white” mill served in low-paying custodial positions—Lumpkin develops a bond of maternal sympathy between Bonnie and an African American woman who sweeps the floors.¹⁶ Maternal suffering, thus, becomes a way not only to develop sympathy among working-class women but to cross boundaries between white and African American women. After Bonnie returns to the weave room, “all who worked there were sympathetic and kind. Mary, the colored woman who swept on Bonnie's side of the room, came up and said: ‘I heard about your baby, and I’m real sorry’” (320). Prior to this moment, Bonnie and Mary had no opportunity or occasion to talk; racial barriers keep social barriers firmly in place. Knowing that Bonnie is reproaching herself for the child’s death and even more fearful about the ones she still must leave at home, Mary offers to send her own daughter, Savannah, to stay with Bonnie’s children, “until you get more peaceful in your mind.” This moment causes Bonnie to reconsider her own racial biases:

Bonnie looked at Mary Allen, at her plump, good natured black face that was full of sympathy, and Mary Allen turned away. For a long time afterward Bonnie remembered with shame the thought that was behind the look she had given Mary. For she was thinking of what people said—that colored people were all shiftless and no account; and had believed what they said in face of the fact that Mary Allen did her work in the mill quietly and as if she was willing to do her best. (321)

Mary’s motivations are entirely sympathetic; she understands Bonnie’s fear and pain, reaching out to her as one mother to another. However, the result of her actions is to create more than an emotional bond; it is a sentimental moment insofar as Bonnie is taught by her feelings that Mary is a person just like herself, a mother who loves her children and fears their loss. Knowing that,

¹⁶ Lumpkin does not clearly address whether the fictional mill in *To Make My Bread* is an all-white mill or a segregated mill, as she does not portray African Americans at work in spooling or weaving rooms in equivalent jobs to whites. She portrays Mary Allen, who sweeps floors, and African Americans who live in Stumptown and are being recruited to fill the positions vacated by the striking workers.

Mary is able to comfort Bonnie: “It was her need to have that anxiety lightened when the new grave had just been covered up that Mary Allen understood.” Maternal sympathy, thus, crosses racial boundaries, teaching that all of these women share an experience that bonds them into an affectional community, regardless of color.

Maternal sympathy transforms to class solidarity when Bonnie and John begin organizing union strikes. The mill hopes to hire African American workers to “scab,” and Bonnie willingly travels to Stumptown, the African American neighborhood, to talk about the union and argue for class solidarity. After the strike commences, a handbill appears criticizing the union for promoting interracial organizing that reads: “YOUR UNION DOES NOT BELIEVE IN WHITE SUPREMACY. THINK ABOUT THAT, WHITE PEOPLE” (350). Not all whites are comfortable with interracial organizing. When Zinie admits that she told John he shouldn’t support the union, Ora and Bonnie counter her views: Ora focuses on the sentimental humanist argument—that African Americans are people—and Bonnie focuses on the sentimental proletarian argument—that African Americans are also workers. Ora admits that “[i]t did worry me at first But I’ve come to see that if people let colored folks tend their babies and cook their food, they really don’t think their color makes them dirty they’ve got souls the same as us it’s a shameful thing for ye not t’ know they’re human beings the same as us” (350-51). Meanwhile Bonnie explains that “colored people work alongside of us And I can’t see why they shouldn’t fight alongside us, and we by them” (350). When Zinie contemptuously asks about interracial marriage—clearly a hot-button issue with reluctant whites—Bonnie counters that “I’m not a-talking about marrying The marrying can take care of itself. We are all working people we’ve got to work together.”

Bonnie is the female leader of the revolutionary position, and when her racial views

cause her to be branded a “nigger lover” and to receive death threats from racist, anti-union, anti-strike individuals, she refuses to back down. She continues going to Stumptown, “for she was strong in knowing that Mary Allen and the others there needed the message as much as her people did. She could not be so selfish as to keep it only for herself and hers” (354). In this way, Mary Allen becomes the sentimental, maternal image of her people, reminding Bonnie of the need to cross racial boundaries. Bonnie also becomes a sentimentalized, Christ-like missionary, sharing the “good news” of the union and the Communist message. Thus, her murder, which is promised in retribution for interfering with the mill’s efforts to recruit scab workers from African American neighborhoods, implies a Christ-like sacrifice on behalf of the poor and oppressed. Although the text largely downplays religious symbolism, Bonnie’s role as a Christ figure highlights the importance of religion as a way to bond communities and its ability to create kinship bonds.

Bonnie’s brother John is left to carry on the revolutionary work after Bonnie’s death. John undergoes a different form of racial education, so that he is an acceptable inheritor of Bonnie’s legacy. Because John had more exposure to Granpap’s Confederate history and racial views, several of his racial encounters occur in tandem with Granpap. As a child, John experiences kindness from Jake, the African American cook at a restaurant Granpap frequents. Later, when Emma moves the family to a farm at the edge of town, John witnesses Granpap’s learning how to grow cotton from an African American man named Moses. Although Granpap knows how to farm, he is unfamiliar with the process of growing this particular crop and “often had to go across the road to consult with Moses Moses was a help to Granpap that spring. Granpap learned from the black man how to put the cotton seed in the ground with the machine, and many other things” (240). Granpap, in return, buys chickens from Moses. Although Granpap

doesn't offer direct words about a change in his views, he no longer rails against "niggers" preventing him from finding work; instead, John witnesses Granpap's receiving help from an African American.

As an adult, John is courted by the mill bosses to work for their interests, which includes segregation because preventing white and African American workers from finding solidarity helps them keep unions out of the mill. John is persuaded to join a "lodge" in the village whose motto is "Keep out the foreigner and the nigger. Neither belongs," and he is "initiated into the lodge with many indignities" (293). However, because of his personal interactions with African Americans and his sympathy for workers, John finds it difficult to buy into the ideology of the lodge and the privilege it represents; he "became a very unsatisfactory member." Because of his sympathies, John becomes a witness to the hypocrisy of the organization—it is dedicated to upholding privilege, not to helping others: "He saw the members dressed up in fancy costumes parading around the hall and speaking in loud unnatural voices. The strutting did not affect him in the way it was meant to do, for he could only laugh." Rather than encouraging him to develop pride in white supremacy, John's participation in the lodge shows him the pathetic superficiality of the men's views. Although the group can be provoked to dangerous action, they are motivated by fear and pride; they are not supported by genuine human connection. Thus, John is pushed further toward emotional identification with other workers and is willing to follow Bonnie as she develops bonds across race boundaries.

Resisting Authority: Feeling Wrong to Feel Right

Religious institutions and theological debates were a central force in shaping culture and mores in the nineteenth century. Many nineteenth-century sentimental texts founded their moral

arguments in Protestant principles. By the twentieth century, religion remained an important cultural force in American society but other political and social institutions—such as naturalism and modernism as well as science, medicine, and increasing urbanization—had begun to rival it for influence. As a proletarian text, *To Make My Bread* challenges the morally instructive force of religion, as well as the institutional forces that shape moral ideologies. Although it does not explicitly argue a Marxist position against the need for religion itself, it critiques figures who blindly endorse certain beliefs without paying attention to the social realities of those who are meant to be made virtuous by those ideals.

Ministers and doctors in the novel are generally associated with a lack of understanding about the people who make up the working class. They can, at times, work against the bonds that hold the community together. While acknowledging the important function they serve in caring for the community—healing the sick and providing spiritual guidance—Lumpkin points out that both doctors and ministers are generally members of the middle class, with economic and social interests that separate them from the people they serve. More importantly, many doctors and ministers are connected to and supported by the very capitalist enterprises that exploit the people they attempt to help. Because doctors and ministers inhabit different class positions and benefit from a system that exploits the working class, the ideologies they impose on workers do not reflect the realities of working-class life. By highlighting the disconnect between these authority groups—those who are meant to offer sympathy but fail to do so—and the people they serve, Lumpkin reveals fundamental misunderstandings by the middle class about the working class. As working-class characters feel ashamed for their failures but then grow frustrated and angry at being held accountable by individuals who do not understand their real-life experiences, their shame transforms to a revolutionary consciousness—“feeling right.” Thus, readers, who

sympathize with the men and women who long to live up to sentimental ideals, sympathize not just with worker suffering but also with their transition from shame to resistance.

Lumpkin acknowledges that religion is an important facet to working-class and Appalachian community life. There are numerous social events that center around religious rituals, including the baptism of young men and women, signaling their membership into the church as well as their ascension into adulthood. Lumpkin, however, shows that the ritual is a communal rite of passage as much as a religious one. “Baptizing day came early in August,” Lumpkin writes, “[w]hether a person was religious like Basil, or defiant like Granpap, they all attended Baptizing. It was an occasion for neighbors and kin who had not seen each other for a year or more to meet” (55). Lumpkin also highlights the inherent economic aspect to religious rituals: although most of these families have starved all winter, the baptism requires special clothing purchased from Hal Swain’s store “at a special price” (61).

Rather than serving as a support and spiritual guide for the Appalachian community, Lumpkin makes it clear that the minister judges and looks down on them:

To Preacher Warren all the people in the company were pinch-faced and uninteresting. As he tethered his horse and got his bundle of baptizing clothes from the saddle bag, he felt a load in his heart because as far as he could know he would be doing this very thing summer after summer. He longed with his whole soul to live in town, where his children might grow up in the proper manner, and he might have a congregation of live people. (59)

The minister does not view the people around him as human beings, as souls who are in need of guidance or spiritual salvation—the sentimental view of a Christian pastor. Instead, Preacher Warren’s perspective is informed by class. His desires are selfish and material but couched in the language of religion; he “wanted something more . . . a church with stained glass windows, a baptizing pool under the platform and a regular Bible rest where his big Bible would stay from week to week He wanted refinement and reserve” (59-60). Rather than focusing on human

needs or spiritual growth, the minister desires the trappings of wealth.

Ministers are no better in town. The mill operates every day except Sundays, but Bonnie “stayed away from church, partly because that was the only day on which she could be with the children” (317). Ironically, by reducing the little free time mill workers had, attending church has the potential to separate families instead of bringing them together. However, Bonnie also stays away because she is angry that Mr. Simpkins, the minister of her village, preaches on the “sacredness of the family” and criticizes “those who did not keep their families together” (318). Bonnie points out the hypocrisy of Simpkins’s views and his middle-class privilege:

Nothing would have pleased her more than to stay at home and raise her children in the best way she knew how. And there were many other women like her in the village. Mr. Simpkins seemed to think if they wished they could stay at home and have a life of comparative ease. Because his wife could stay at home, he thought that other men’s wives could do the same. (318)

Mr. Simpkins believes that the working-class failure to meet a cultural ideal he espouses is a moral failure rather than an economic one. Later, Bonnie points out a further hypocrisy in Simpkins’s stance when the mill forcibly evicts families during the strike. Simpkins does nothing to stop the evictions, even when babies and sick people are thrown into the dirty streets: “[i]f that isn’t breaking up the home, I don’t know what is” (364). Her love, her shame, and then her anger thus serve as both rebuke and resistance to traditional authority figures of sentimental literature and the middle-class culture at large, creating a new form of education through feeling.

Ministers are associated with the middle-class forces that keep the system of economic—and thus, social—inequality in place. Preacher Warren, who aspires to become a member of the middle class, eventually moves to town, and all of the “high-ups,” as well as the mill superintendent, become members of his church (216). At a Christmas box exchange for the workers, superintendent Burnett appears on stage with four local preachers and an additional

visiting preacher. One of the ministers who speaks is clearly a member of the middle class because he is physically robust and describes his well-appointed home where “we have a tree, just as you have one here, a study with a glass window, and a lawn” (368).¹⁷ Mr. Warmlesley offers a Christmas message that suggests the workers should be grateful for their low wages because it makes them spiritually superior: “some day the rich will see your goodness: and bow before your spiritual wealth that is greater than their material wealth, so that in the end they will endeavor to become like you, simple and good” (369). Warmlesley’s speech is made ridiculous by the physical contrast between his appearance and the workers who listen to his pompous moralizing: their faces are “gaunt” and tired,” the boys and girls are “wan and stunted,” and their “faces, raised to the light, seemed to have no flesh, but to be made of bone with skin stretched tightly over it” (370). Warmlesley leaves immediately after his speech, returning to his comfortable home and healthy children, ignoring the reality before him. Meanwhile, the millworkers are understandably critical, noting his hypocrisy by ironically commenting that “[i]f the rich could get the grace of Jesus Christ in their hearts, it stands to reason we’d all have enough.”

Like preachers, physicians often “ministered” to the working class community, providing needed services while also instructing people how to “live better” from a perspective based upon middle-class ideologies and experiences. Doctors and health care providers (as well as social workers) appear frequently in proletarian texts as individuals possessing the knowledge to save lives, but they also have the power to deeply shame. Emma grows sick with pellagra and when the doctor is called, he is angry that she, like so many other poor women, is terminally ill with a preventable disease. He prescribes that they should “[g]ive her plenty of lean meat, milk, and

¹⁷ When adding a second room to their cabin, Granpap wistfully tells Emma that he wishes “we could have a window in the other room with glass” (23) and admits that he had almost ordered a window until he thought of Emma’s anger at the waste of money when they can barely afford food. Emma responds “We’ve got doors.”

other nourishing food” (253). Emma clearly would have better food if the McClures could afford it. When Granpap admits he doesn’t know how to provide it and asks for help, the doctor becomes “angry enough to frighten Bonnie ‘Don’t ask me how A doctor can’t produce decent food for the many that need it. What can I do? Don’t ask me.’” Echoing a scene that occurs in many proletarian women’s texts, the doctor provides a simple answer for Emma’s illness—she needs more food and rest—beyond reach of those he is addressing. He has no other answer, such as *how* to obtain those things when the family is already working as hard as they can and spending frugally. Thus, Lumpkin pits her working-class family against a doctor who represents the indifference and ignorance of a middle class that assumes that a lack of education and laziness, not lack of resources, is the problem.

It is significant that Bonnie witnesses the exchange between Emma and the doctor. Reflecting on her mother’s diagnosis and the doctor’s hasty exit, Bonnie realizes that “[s]he knew many children in the village who were afflicted with the disease, and grown up people.” Not only is the sick—and slowly dying—mother an object of pity, but the child viewing the scene is another marker of sympathetic identification. The scene also foreshadows the struggles Bonnie herself will face meeting the physical needs of her family, the doctor’s judgments against her for those failures, and her connection between the personal and the communal. In such a scene, Lumpkin confers sympathy upon Emma by showing the ways her work environment and the conditions of her class lead to a slow, painful death: not only was this death preventable, but the *ignorance of the middle-class observers* contributes to her death.

When Bonnie loses her child, she is herself subject to the condescension of a doctor who judges her for what he sees as failures. Hurrying home from the mill, she “wondered what the sickness might be. The cold he had been sick with for several days had been just like the colds all

the children had at times” (319). When the doctor arrives, he is “angry with her for not calling him before. The baby, he said, must have had pneumonia for two days at least. Bonnie was silent before him” (320). Bonnie feels ashamed: “If she had not thought of expense and called the doctor earlier. It was thinking of the money involved that had held her back.” The loss of her child not only shows Bonnie’s suffering, but it also emphasizes the tragedy of poverty whereby a mother—despite her hard work—cannot afford to call a doctor. Bonnie is silenced by the doctor’s anger and by the shame his criticism induces, but the loss of her child and her grief is powerful, speaking against the implication that her indifference caused the child’s death.¹⁸

In company towns, the doctor serves a similar role to the owner of the company store, both providing healthcare and running the local pharmacy, which means he diagnoses illness in addition to dispensing (and charging for) the medicines to treat them. His patients, therefore, are caught in yet another cycle of debt from which they cannot escape: they work long hours with low wages, grow ill from laboring in extreme work conditions, require medical treatment for those illnesses, run up bills for the doctor’s care and his medicines, and must work more hours to offset the accumulating debt. Emma’s company doctor “was kind enough to let them run up a bill for drugs at his store, so the bottles on the chair beside Emma’s bed were kept replenished” (276). The doctor’s “kindness” is both genuine—in that he allows them to obtain medicine

¹⁸ The doctor shames Bonnie in a context, as well, of a faith in the social and medical power of physicians, who hold an elevated status. Although the McClures had received advice from a neighboring friend’s doctor that Emma “needs plenty of good food, and no doctor,” they felt obligated to call for the company doctor when Emma’s health began to fail: “with people advising that they get Doctor Foley, and with their own uncertainty, they found it the only thing to do” (276). The McClures and the laboring community rely on the company doctor because they do not know how to treat severe illness and because doctors possess knowledge. However, *To Make My Bread* emphasizes the participation of figures such as doctors in the system which prevents the working-class from achieving economic stability. The doctor’s social power is, therefore, set in light of his own complicity in the capitalist system, de-emphasizing his ability to shame working mothers like Emma and Bonnie because of the ways he is tainted by the capitalist profit system. A doctor holds a position of respect; he is a figure who does not suffer from the same ills as his patients, is educated, and espouses the ideals of the middle-class. He is, therefore, able to enforce traditional cultural standards and shame his patients for their inability to provide proper food and rest—which they can readily see the doctor himself has no problem obtaining. His services are expensive, which makes them exclusive and valuable; it also makes them difficult for the working-class to afford.

despite their poverty—and deceptive—in that the narration implies doubt as to whether those medicines are necessary, but the bills keep adding up. By pointing out the complicity of the doctor in working-class oppression, Lumpkin undermines his ability to shame mothers and families for their financial lacks.

As a social worker, the character of Miss Gordon serves as an extension of the medical community. Working for the mill, she sponsors social clubs whose purpose is to educate working-class women about proper domestic behavior, echoing the conduct books and advice manuals of nineteenth-century domestic literature. When the women workers ignore her, “their indifference hurt her badly,” and she fails to understand why they aren’t interested (301). Miss Gordon represents a middle-class that pities the struggles of the working-class but does not comprehend the cause of their struggles, instead believing the solution is to reinforce more strongly middle-class values and rules. By pointing out the problems in Miss Gordon’s thinking, Lumpkin’s characters resist the figure of the middle-class woman who criticizes them—and women like them—without clearly understanding their experience of poverty. Bonnie provides a critical commentary on why simple sympathy is not enough:

“She tells us, ‘You must feed your children milk every day and plenty of eggs, for otherwise young ones will get pellagra.’”
. . . Bonnie stopped speaking. She took one hand from the baby. “Of course it’s true,” she repeated. There was a silence, and John knew his sister was crying.
“I’d like the best food,” she said. “And everything for my young one . . . but how to get them . . . I don’t know.” (302)

Although Bonnie feels sadness and shame for her inability to live up to the ideals Miss Gordon represents, she resists this criticism because the gap between the ideal and the reality is so great. Despite this awareness, Bonnie feels the shame of her failure, and by showing both the contradiction and the shame, Lumpkin creates sympathy among readers.

Notwithstanding their ability to criticize the hypocrisy of figures who represent middle-

class criticism, women in the working-class community also internalize shame. While it is possible to point out the flaws in ideology promoted by outsiders, *To Make My Bread* illustrates a real danger from criticism within the working-class themselves. Not only do Emma and Bonnie suffer over their inability to run their households well enough to provide fundamental necessities for their children, they also worry over how to manage in the face of peer disapproval. Even among the working class, views on how to maintain a home—such as keeping it clean and not doing housework on Sundays in violation of the Sabbath—reflect True Womanhood domestic ideologies. However, their material circumstances require these mothers to work outside the home, leaving them with few options regarding the time they have available to complete housework. Aware of the women’s stress over their inability to work full time shifts in the textile mill while also completing domestic duties, Bonnie’s brother John transgresses traditional gender roles and tries to help with the housework:

When no one was looking John made up for Bonnie’s worry by helping with the dishwashing and cooking. He even scrubbed the floors when Ora and Emma had no time to do so. Ora and Emma, having to do washing on Saturdays and ironing Monday nights, had little time for scrubbing. It would have been against the feelings of the whole community for them to do scrubbing and ironing on Sunday. Yet in secret they sometimes did this, and probably the other women did this, too, and never told outside. (204)

The women are caught between the demands of caring for their homes and families and the criticisms of their neighbors (and by extension, their readers). While other women in their community presumably struggle with the same burdens, the social ideal is so strong they attempt to accomplish their work in secret so as not to appear to violate these norms. These circumstances lead to a silence about the actual experience of the working-class, a fracture within that community, and an inability to challenge what are unfair labor standards both outside and inside the home, maintained by a capitalist economy and its companion cultural ideals.

Despite clear moral justification for breaking social convention in her own life, Ora still directs criticism against another woman who works outside the home, questioning her motivations:

“What business would keep a mother away from her young ones?” Ora asked.
“I reckon the same kind that keeps us from ours, making money to live on.”
This quieted Ora. Only she thought to herself, “If I had a house like that I’d think myself rich enough to stay at home.” (248)

Judging each other for failing to meet the gendered social role of stay-at-home mother, despite their awareness of the economic hardships that require women to work outside the home, reveals the cultural strength of unattainable middle-class ideals that still define these women’s senses of femininity and motherhood. Their judgment and derision, directed toward each other and ignoring their own realities, serves as a form of gendered and classed self-policing that maintains these social norms as well as the divisions among those who can meet these ideals and those who cannot, separating men from women, middle from working class. It also reveals the way in which these impossible ideals fracture the potential unity of a working-class community that holds itself to them: so long as they deride each other for these failures, they will not see themselves as a unified group, bonded through common experience.

Emma, however, responds to Ora by pointing out that the woman in question not only has an economic reason for working but that her reasons are like their own, signaling an awareness of the commonalities among working-class women. Emma serves as a foil to Ora and other women in the community, showing the ways that they can resist the social fracturing created by judging each other against impossible sentimental, middle-class ideals. Bonnie shares Emma’s perspective, which she eventually develops into an activist role. Prior to becoming a union organizer, however, she resists criticism for perceived gendered failures from friends and members of her community who see her work outside the home as a failure to be a proper wife

and mother: “She knew they might think it queer for her to work, when she had a husband. They did not realize the money it took to pay for a doctor for Emma. And Granpap made so little—and Jim was on half time only. The others would soon learn for themselves how hard it was to get on” (285). Like her mother, Bonnie resists fracturing within the working-class community by building upon common experience to show that their lives do not meet sentimental, gendered ideals which should not subject them to judgment and shame. They see this as a source of common feeling, which should create sympathy for others and thus strengthen community instead of weaken it. However, the desire to be good mothers and the realities that prevent them from meeting these ideals still serves to extend sympathy between the working-class and middle-class because it acknowledges the similarities between them: although both embrace the ideal of women who can stay home to care for their families, only middle class women are able to achieve it. Working-class women fail in this regard through circumstance rather than character and are, therefore, deserving of sympathy.

Feeling Right to Strike

Although *To Make My Bread* dismantles sentimental ideologies about the home as a place of refuge and feminized emotional connection, Lumpkin also uses the sentimental mode to show a parallel between the home and factory. The novel reveals the ways in which shared labor and shared experience creates community, arguing for the factory as a pseudo-domestic space that mimics the sympathies and affectional bonds that are developed in the home. In *To Make My Bread*, individuals who are brought together in the public workspace relate to one another and develop common feeling; they are, therefore, taught by sympathetic connection to develop a moral awareness about the capitalist labor system that oppresses them all. Such realizations, in

proletarian sentimentalism, educate subjects toward a revolutionary consciousness.

Beyond critiquing the home as a space of refuge and respite, Lumpkin also establishes the domestic space of the home as a space of labor. In addition to a place where the labor of birth occurs—as it does in the opening pages—women work in the home to cook and clean, endlessly. The presentation of women’s labor—making women’s work in the home visible—is a common theme in women’s proletarian fiction, but Lumpkin also connects this labor to the development of community. In Appalachia, the men and women “swapped forces” on a day when the McClure men go to Possum Hollow to help Frank put up a shed while Ora McClure and Jennie Martin come to Swain’s Crossing to help with quilting. The women’s sewing work is placed in parallel to the men’s industrial labor of building. As they stitch, the women reminisce, talking about the quilting parties of their youth, religion and drinking, and even telling ghost stories, imparting some of their background to Jennie Martin (who is new to the area) and initiating Bonnie into the narrative history of her community.

Another form of women’s domestic labor that extends beyond the daily work of cooking, cleaning, and caretaking is weaving. Women convert wool into thread and cloth, producing fabric and clothing while working in the home. In Swain’s Crossing, Granma Wesley’s loom becomes an important tie between the workspace of the home and the workspace of the factory when Emma begins to consider moving her family to town and working in the textile mill.¹⁹ During a visit, Emma wants to try it, feeling insecure because “[d]own in the factories they must all know how to run a loom, like this one” (140). Although Emma shares that she has been told

¹⁹ The elderly Granma Wesley owns a spinning wheel, a loom that had been passed down from the earliest generations of Wesleys to settle in the mountains, and two sheep. Her ambition was to finish a coverlet from their wool before she died, and each year “she sheared the animals herself, combed the wool and spun it into thread for the loom. In the summer on a clear day anyone passing through Possum Hollow near enough to the cabin could hear the loom” (27). “Everyone” in the community knows of Granma Wesley’s “great wish to finish the coverlet before she died.” Thus, it becomes both a community tragedy and salvation when her family must slaughter and eat the sheep in order to survive a particularly harsh winter.

the mills “have a machine to work it all,” Emma works the heddles of the loom and “thought of herself sitting in a factory beside a quiet machine working it easily, talking to the other women who would be working at the machines beside her. It would be a very neighborly arrangement, as if neighbors had gathered to sit around and talk at a quilting.” Emma connects the labor of weaving in the factory with the experiences of quilting bees in domestic settings, transforming the factory into a domestic space. Although her later experiences in the factory will belie this dream of domestic connection, *To Make My Bread* draws a link between the labor of home and factory, showing that the people who labor together in both places are part of a community that extends past the mill gates.

Once they are working inside the mills, the McClures and other factory laborers discover that the noise, dangerous machinery, sharp-eyed managers, and exhausting conditions actively work against the “neighborly arrangement” found in quilting circles by pitting employees against each other. Although Emma imagines a “quiet machine” that would allow neighbors to chat as they work, the noise in the mill is deafening, as the sound of machines “fills the whole room” and people “shouted trying to make their voices heard above the grinding” (326, 258). Over time, the sound of the mill becomes emotionally significant, symbolizing the way in which workers are worn down over time by their exhausting and endless labor:

At first the throb of the mill had been like the throb of a big heart beating for the good of those who worked under the roof, for it gave hope of desires to be fulfilled. A woman, one of the weavers, said . . . “The weave room has a sound different from the other rooms. It’s like the sound of sinners’ teeth grinding in hell.”

Now to Emma the throb of a heart had changed. She was feeling the grind of teeth. The mill crunched up and down—“I’ll grind your bones to make my bread.” (219)

The mill beats like a heart, suggesting that the emotional center of worker’s lives is not limited to the home but is also shared in the workplace. But the sounds of the heart change from hopeful to hellish. The sinners’ grinding teeth references Matthew 13:41-42, which states that the “Son of

Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (*King James Version*). Although the anonymous worker likely draws her vivid simile from a recollection of the “fire and brimstone” style services that were commonly preached in evangelical churches, it also suggests that the workers feel cast off, weeded out of common society, that they feel trapped in a hell of ceaseless labor with no hope of salvation. Emma, however, connects the grinding teeth to a children’s tale about an ogre who grinds human bones, a deadly and domestic metaphor that portrays the big (literally) consuming the little, shifting the metaphor toward a critique of capitalism and its abuses of the laborer.

Workers are expected to focus on the individual in order to survive, to get ahead. Basil, Emma McClure’s estranged son, espouses this ideology, pursuing his studies and distancing himself from the family as he tries to gain the middle class. He tells John “If you want to get along . . . you must remember that you can’t think too much about other people. If you rise in this world you’ve got to rise by yourself Then—when you’ve risen—you can reach down and help others” (233). Basil promotes exactly the kind of every-man-for-himself ideology at the center of capitalism and American individualism. It’s the view that the mill owners expect John to embrace when they make him a section boss. However, *To Make My Bread* shows that this individualism is at odds with a strong, healthy community; a capitalist system pits workers against each other so that they must sacrifice community for success or sacrifice success for community: “there were plenty of hard workers who hadn’t risen. The higher-ups had to short the regular hands in weighing and making out the pay checks in order to make as much money for the mill as possible. It was a known fact that the higher-ups had to do this as part of their job. But the best ones hated to do this against a neighbor, so it kept them from rising” (221).

John, like Bonnie, at first naively believes he can achieve success as a faithful worker who serves the priorities of the mill while still valuing his bonds with the community: “John was beginning to rise in the world. Only one thing kept him from being contented Would he go on the side of those above or stand up for his kin and friends? . . . he resented their silent questioning. He would show them that he could be fair, and yet climb higher than others had done” (298). However, when John suggests raising worker wages because if people “did not have enough food, and enough sleep, and were worn down, they could not do the best work for the mill,” his bosses are taken aback, telling him that they didn’t think “when we made you section boss that you would turn on us like this” (299). Attempting to explain that taking care of people has economic benefits, John argues that “it’s just as important t’ keep a man or woman that’s working at the machines in good order” (300). However, the mill boss explains “a machine costs the management lots of money to replace” without having to state that people are easily and cheaply replaceable. Mr. Burnett ends the conversation by threatening John with the loss of his position, saying that if he keeps expressing such ideas “you can’t be of use to us.” Like a machine, John is expected to be “of use,” and he comes to the realization that he cannot simultaneously be of use to the factory, serving the priorities of material production, and to the community, serving the priorities of human emotion and suffering.

People are not machines, and the unforgivable flaw of the capitalist system *To Make My Bread* critiques is that people are treated like easily replaceable parts in a machine. What distinguishes the human from the machine is his or her ability to feel and to suffer. As John argues with his supervisor about the value of maintaining workers versus maintaining machines, he observes “it’s even more important, for they are people, and the machines, they aren’t human, and can’t feel misery” (300). Indeed, as Bonnie observes, “[t]hey pay themselves for wear and

tear on the machines But hit seems I don't get paid for wear and tear on myself" (319). Such is the heart of Lumpkin's sentimental proletarian argument: human feeling leads to a moral imperative. If by definition, as Dillon argues, "sentimentalism involves both emotion and a subsequent reflection upon that emotion—a putting to use of emotion, as for instance, when it opens a subjective path toward autonomy or moral sense," then this realization—people are not just machines but they are more important than machines—is a sentimental call to a Marxist awakening (515).

One of the critiques of sentimentalism has been its lack of action. For Philip Fisher, tears in sentimentalism have been a sign of "powerlessness . . . a witness who cannot effect action will experience suffering as deeply as the victim," and the common trope of death emphasizes passivity and the inevitability of suffering (108). Lauren Berlant argues that the emphasis on universal pain creates "a passive and vaguely civic-minded ideal of compassion" so that the "political as a place of acts oriented toward publicness becomes replaced by a world of private thoughts, leanings, and gestures projected out as an intimate public of private individuals inhabiting their own affective changes" (41-42). However, Lumpkin demonstrates that the moral awareness created by the sentimental inevitably leads to action; the force of feeling, in fact, requires it. The more John comes to feel the workers' misery in the face of indifferent bosses and wealthy overseers, the more of an advocate for change he becomes. John works to share "the sound of the sorrow of those that work" (326). Sentimentalism extends emotional identification across social boundaries to those who have been excluded, but rather than being brought into the fold (so to speak) by an insider who extends sympathy to outsiders, this group of victims extends sympathy to each other in order to feel recognized and validated by their suffering, which unites them into an affectional community. Thus, they bond into a group that can act in their own

interests. Once John unifies sympathy with a desire to act, his feelings affirm this emotional and radical evolution in the symbolic space of the factory: he returns to work, where he arrives late and has his pay docked a full day's wages, but he ignores the overseer's criticisms, for "there was something else in him greater than the overseer's words. He stood before his machines with a joyous feeling swelling in him" (328).

The mill itself is figuratively given the ability to feel because the workers who inhabit the space share the same emotional responses. After conditions worsen and the management insists that workers must accept longer hours with less pay, "a feeling of misery came over the mill. Before there had been a feeling of deadness, which nothing perhaps could arouse, a feeling of stolid endurance. Now the feeling was different. It was one of acute, active misery" (300). In the midst of the misery and fear, as well as company intimidation, John and Bonnie encourage workers to attend secret union meetings. When John's activities are discovered, he and another coworker are fired. John refuses to be taken aside to be dismissed in private and insists that his section boss say the words in the middle of the workroom in front of all of the other men. Not only do the other men refuse to go back to work, but the moment of resistance is marked by their awareness of emotional solidarity and sympathetic feeling:

In the short time that they had stood together they had felt something. They had felt a sense of standing up for each other. For so long each had been alone with his family striving after enough food to keep from starving, and enough clothes to keep from going naked. And they had been alone in that fight. Now they were going to stand together, side by side, and there came to them the feeling of strength. (333)

Sympathy leads to solidarity and strength, an affectional bond that moves them toward collective action. From this moment forward, families no longer suffer individually but are joined together in a group that shares food, shelter, resources, and emotional support in the fight for fair treatment and the ability to earn a decent living.

Shortly after he is fired, John and several union organizers call a meeting: “[t]here was a feeling like that of an outdoor church meeting in the mountains, for people were talking as neighbors do who have not seen each other in a long time” (338). Although they are meeting on the road next to the mill, it is “as if the open road was a house full of hospitable people.” Lumpkin’s description connects the union meeting to both the community gatherings of Appalachian church services and socializing in neighbors’ homes, emphasizing the ways that workers have been drawn together by sympathy, which in turn reignites the sense of community that had previously connected them. Both the church and the home are sentimental spaces in which people develop emotional, community-building connection; Lumpkin’s description equates the union meeting to these forms of sentimental space. It is the sentiment that creates the space.

As the company cracks down, Lumpkin underscores the importance of affectional bonds in keeping the workers united. Strike organizers rent a building to distribute donated food, knowing that families already have too little. Those that send the food also send a message: “What we send is not charity. Because your fight is ours, in sharing what we have with you we are only helping our own” (342). Thus, the family group is extended outward, to include other union supporters and working families in other mill towns who are in need of the same reforms. The members of the town are so moved by this gesture that many come to touch the truck that carried the supplies, even after it has been emptied. After the mill evicts families of strikers, they move into tents. Because they pitch their tents together on the edge of properties owned by the mill, the workers are effectively united into tent cities, sharing a home space that had once been divided by walls. They “put up a rough shelter for a kitchen, and ate in the open” taking their food in the tents only if it is raining (358). The women share domestic duties, with some of them

taking charge of the children each day, leaving others free to participate in such strike activities as picketing. Thus, the women share childcare, housework, and organizing responsibilities as an extended family, achieving the proletarian ideal of a collective group.

Sentimental sympathy is the key element not only to Bonnie's and John's—and their coworkers'—radical awakening but also to their ability to organize effectively and bring additional workers into the strike. When Bonnie writes her "Mill Mothers' Lament," Ora advises her to keep composing and let others take care of the meal that evening: "You sit right there and finish, Bonnie. We've got enough t' help inside. You write that ballad. We've got t' reach people's hearts as well as their stomachs" (343). Bonnie's song works in conjunction with the speeches to capture the crowd. They demand that she sing it again, so she invites them to "join in when you can. You all know the tune So just listen to the words" (346). Bonnie's ballad operates by engaging the listeners on an emotional level and then inviting them to participate. Just as Ella May Wiggins did in real life, Bonnie takes a familiar Appalachian ballad and changes the lyrics to capture the audience's enjoyment of the music and emphasize her political message. Sentimental tropes, Dobson argues, operate by incorporating the conventional and familiar to create "evocative metaphors" and serve as "vehicles for depictions of all-too-common social tragedies and political outrages stemming from the failure of society to care for the disconnected" ("Reclaiming Sentimental Literature" 272). Not only does the content of Bonnie's song operate in just this manner by focusing on a sentimentalized version of motherhood, but it also does this by taking a ballad familiar to its Appalachian audience and altering the words to become a song of protest as well as a remembrance of their shared mountain heritage. Further, by singing the song along with Bonnie, the audience members become active participants in developing the sentimental metaphor of the protest song.

Bonnie feels her activism is “a loving care toward all the people, and a gratefulness to them for having come out, for seeing that this was the best thing to do” (344). The process of moving everyone toward revolutionary consciousness occurs on an emotional level, so that those who do not convert—those who give in to the pressures of the mill or the need for work and scab—deserve pity rather than anger. When Ora recognizes her son, Young Frank, among the militia called out to subdue the strikers, she asks him if he will “fight against your own” and addresses the line of soldiers asking, “Air we not your people?” (351). Similarly, Bonnie “felt sympathy for [the scabs], since, like her, they were poor and only wanted to make their bread, but she knew they must learn that if they scabbed then they were really cheating themselves in the end, and were also being traitors to their own people” (359). Reprimanding Dewey Fallon, who is attempting to recruit strikebreakers among African American workers, Bonnie tells him that he should feel ashamed “for going against your own people. Not so long ago, you was a mill hand yourself. And now you’ve reached a higher place you’ve gone back on your own” (360). While the strikers feel anger at workers who undermine their cause, the true tragedy is sentimental separation: those who cross that line betray their own people and are separated from them.

The revolutionary education that occurs throughout the novel is rooted in feeling and sympathy. Thus, the novel closes with Bonnie’s murder and funeral, focusing upon the emotional impact of her death. *To Make My Bread* leaves readers and characters in the midst of the struggle, but—while the outcome of the actual Gastonia strikes may not be changed—a reader’s response to these events may carry a revolutionary consciousness forward. Like Ella May Wiggins, Bonnie is murdered by mill supporters who escape justice. Bonnie is addressing a crowd at a protest rally when two shots ring out and she falls to the stage floor. Although Bonnie

is mortally wounded, the planned picket line for the evening carries forward, and strikers march two-by-two toward the mill singing one of Bonnie's songs before the line is broken by a brutal attack. The next morning, Bonnie is peacefully laid out, and Ora remembers Bonnie's life, knowing that "she had not wanted to die. There was no one who had wished more for life. And she had wanted enjoyment not only for herself but for others. For that she had been killed. But what she had begun was not ended with her: and never would be until what she had dreamed about had become a fact" (376). Although Bonnie's death is not the voluntary, Christ-like sacrifice depicted in nineteenth-century sentimental novels, her death is a tragic separation that represents the sacrifice of a martyr.

Bonnie's death sets more events in motion: during a clash with deputies, one of the sheriffs is killed. The tent city is destroyed, and many of the strikers and relief workers are put in jail. Families are separated, and when the women are released from jail they must search for children "who had been driven from the tents that night" (379). Despite the chaos, John holds Bonnie's funeral. The procession that carries her body to the cemetery passes the mill, and "those who were working there left their looms and frames and crowded to the windows." As the rain falls, people "gathered around the grave—faces drawn down with grief and thin with lack of food" (380). John addresses the crowd, exhorting them to place blame on those responsible for her death:

A preacher would tell us that the people who killed Bonnie are fine, honest men.
Maybe they are, but they killed Bonnie.
I don't mean those misguided ones that fired the shot, but the ones who are behind
the killing.
The ones with Power, they killed her. (381)

After John speaks, Sally leads the crowd in singing Bonnie's ballad, but when they finish there is a disturbance as Preacher Simpkins insists on giving a brief homily. The people watch as

red mud is shoveled onto the mound, which slopes down the hill because “it had been hard to fit Bonnie’s grave into the space which they had been able to buy” (382). However, when Simpkins returns to the car that brought him, State Attorney Albert Burnett emerges with a court order that remands Bonnie’s children into state custody. As a final injustice, Bonnie’s children are “stolen” away, to be sent to a state orphanage.

In the novel’s final scene, John visits his friend Stevens who tells him “I cried when I heard about Bonnie cried from anger and shame” (383). Stevens’s tears result from his grief at her loss, but rather than representing passivity, Lumpkin suggests that these tears will be transformed into greater political action. Stevens and John will direct their grief toward the proper target; thus, the novel’s sentimental message is to direct suffering into a critique of those who cause it. The tears signal Bonnie’s death as a sentimental event, one which draws out the sympathies of the entire community. Her funeral captures the attention of strikers as well as mill workers, and the tragedy of her loss is compounded by the additional loss of her children, who are permanently separated from their family. These tragedies are laid squarely at the feet of those with “Power”—the power to cause these events and the power to change them—encouraging readers who sympathize with Bonnie, John, and their working-class family to carry forward the revolutionary consciousness. Thus, while John’s grief causes him to feel “as if everything was finished,” Stevens closes the novel by assuring him of the revolutionary message, “No This is just the beginning” (384).

Appropriating the Working-Class Experience

Although Grace Lumpkin wrote movingly and insightfully about the experiences of the working-class Appalachian farmers and mill workers, she herself was not working-class, a

laborer, or from the Appalachian mountains. Lumpkin was born in Milledgeville, Georgia, a town approximately 98 miles southeast of Atlanta, in 1891, to a well-respected upper-class family that had lost much of its wealth during the Civil War. Her sister, Katharine, chronicled the family's plantation history as well as their formative years in her memoir *The Making of a Southerner* (1947). No longer able to sustain the family as a gentleman farmer, Lumpkin's father found employment with the railroad, which eventually brought them to Columbia, South Carolina, where neighbors considered them to be from a "good family" and they joined the socially elite Trinity Church (Sowinska ix). Around 1910, Lumpkin's father purchased a farm in the Sand Hills hoping to recapture the family's lost plantation heritage. On this farm, Grace and her sister interacted with black and white sharecroppers and attended school with white children from "the poorest classes," even though "[t]here was everything, it seemed, to keep us separate and hardly anything to bridge the gap save our common childhood . . . My clothing was different My lunches were different Even our language tended to separate us" (Lumpkin, K 158-59).

After Lumpkin's father died, the family experienced financial difficulties and struggled to make a living from the farm, eventually moving back to the Columbia area. After Lumpkin completed a teacher's training program at Brenau College in Gainesville, Georgia, she "worked at a variety of jobs that provided her with background material for her novels and helped shape her early political consciousness" (Sowinska x). She taught school in Tennessee and South Carolina, organized a night school for farmers and their wives, and worked for the government as a home demonstration agent. She spent summers living in the North Carolina mountains and, at times, stayed with people who worked in the cotton mills. Lumpkin spent a year in France working as a recreation director for French Girls in Industry and as a YWCA director before returning to

South Carolina to spend two years working as an industrial secretary for the YWCA.

In 1924, Lumpkin moved to New York to become a writer, working for the magazine *The World Tomorrow*, and studying writing at Columbia University. She published an article on the convergence of the New Negro literary movement and proletarian literature in 1926, and her first short stories were published in *The New Masses* the following year. Although she never officially joined the Communist Party, in 1928 she joined the staff of *The New Masses* and was sent south the next year to organize among black sharecroppers and observe the 1929 Gastonia strikes. Her time in Gastonia, combined with her previous experiences in South Carolina and the North Carolina mountains, provided her with the material to write *To Make My Bread*. Lumpkin returned to New York to write, publishing *To Make My Bread* in 1932, and producing articles and an additional proletarian novel, *A Sign for Cain* (1935). However, Lumpkin eventually moved away from the Communist Party, and her third novel, *The Wedding* (1939), avoided Communist politics and focused instead on domestic drama. Eventually, Lumpkin became actively anti-communist, joining the Moral Re-Armament Movement, informing on her former communist friends to the FBI, and devoting her writing to exposing the evils of communism. She published *Full Circle* in 1962, about her changing ideas about communism. Lumpkin continued writing, lecturing, and attending church functions until her death in 1980.

Lumpkin was a descendent of the Southern aristocracy and a member of the middle-class, although she experienced periods of poverty during her lifetime. She closely observed and interacted with sharecroppers, millworkers, Appalachian mountain folk, and participants in the Gastonia strikes, but she was a witness and not a member of the groups whose stories she tells.²⁰

²⁰ Reportage became a significant genre during this period, “creating a rapport between the direct experiences of those who suffered and struggled and the writers who came into contact with them” (Rabinowitz 2). Reportage was the “direct rendering of (class) struggle through carefully detailed (individual) analysis,” and many proletarian

Although Lumpkin may have included a representation of herself—and those who generally occupy her subject position—as Miss Gordon, the misguided, middle-class demonstration agent who feels sorry for the poor, she chose not to write *To Make My Bread* from a middle-class perspective. Rather than objectifying the working-class and extending sympathy outwardly toward them (following the standard operation of nineteenth-century sentimental texts), Lumpkin narratively appropriates and inhabits the position of “Other” in order to overcome the limits of earlier forms of sentimentalism and address the gendered challenges of writing proletarian fiction.

Coiner, Foley, Hall, Nekola, and Rabinowitz have demonstrated that women writing revolutionary fiction in the 1930s were caught in the competing demands of Marxism, which dictated that all class struggle was the same for men and women, and the masculinized dictates of proletarian realists who demanded that authors write from real-life experiences drawn from the male-dominated industries of fields, mines, mills, and factories. Rabinowitz argues that female intellectuals in the Communist Party found few accepted outlets for expression within the emerging proletarian genre because of the association of a feminine literary tradition with the middle-class and the assumption that appropriate topics for proletarian literature excluded women’s issues: “the aesthetics of 1930s literary radicalism stressed the importance of external social forces in shaping literary work. This shift of emphasis denied a feminine literary tradition to the 1930s woman writer and separated her from her bourgeois female literary precursors” (178). Male writers and theorists dominated literary scholarship, serving “as artistic and intellectual gatekeepers,” who, according to Jacquelyn Dowd Hall “often misrecognized the work of radical women writers who saw gender—intertwined with race and class—as a symbol

authors—including Meridel Le Sueur, Josephine Herbst, and John Steinbeck—were not only known for this writing but based much of their later fiction upon it.

of human powerlessness and a key determinant of people's lives. That misrecognition sometimes took the form of overt dismissal and condescension" ("Women Writers" 31). Authors who wrote from women's experiences and described working-class women's domestic concerns—women's exhausting double-shift of labor inside and outside the home, managing childcare, cooking and cleaning, marital rape, birth control, the dangers of childbirth, domestic abuse—were often criticized for valuing women's issues over class issues. If the "proper" proletarian novel was about men who worked in factories, mines, and fields, and participated in strikes in those arenas, how could women write one?

Barbara Foley has pointed out that a majority of women proletarian authors drifted into obscurity—only to be "rediscovered" in the late twentieth century through feminist recovery—because the left press "adopted a male gaze" and "presupposed that selfhood was manhood" resulting in a dominant male literary voice that "gave little encouragement to women writers . . . to articulate revolutionary politics in a distinctly female voice" (153, 154). Rabinowitz has shown that many female proletarian writers developed a combination of the domestic and revolutionary novels in order to address both gender and class concerns. With the publication of *To Make My Bread*, Lumpkin was one of the few female revolutionary novelists who received recognition for achieving proletarian realism. By adopting a working-class subject position and by uniting all workers through feeling, Lumpkin draws intersecting affective bonds between domestic and industrial spaces, refusing the separation between them that domestic novels generally highlight. Thus, Lumpkin is able to portray a nuanced perspective of the working-class—one which examines the effects of capitalism on both men and women—and avoid the criticism generally levied at women proletarian authors for dividing men and women from each other.

In writing a sentimental proletarian novel, Lumpkin maintains a connection to nineteenth-century women's writing and expresses revolutionary politics in, to use Foley's words, "a distinctly female voice." However, while Lumpkin finds feminine expression, the voice she uses is not her own. Largely because of the masculinized construction of the proletariat—both the worker and the intellectual—women writers often expressed difficulty finding their voice. Tillie Lerner Olsen, the author of numerous short stories and the unfinished novel *Yonnonadio* (1974), writes in the afterword to the second edition that Rebecca Harding Davis's nineteenth-century novel *Life in the Iron Mills: Or, the Korl Woman* (1861) was the first piece of fiction written "in absolute identification" with the working-class ("Biographical Interpretation" 69). Rabinowitz expands Olsen's reading, arguing that Davis's novel illustrates that the "body of the working-class woman cannot produce a conventional narrative, and the female intellectual finds (a voice for) herself in the expressions of the male worker. These positions suggest that the narratives constructed by female literary radicals retained many cultural assumptions inherited from mid-nineteenth-century ideology" (177). Lumpkin, indeed, is constrained by criticisms that middle-class women can have nothing helpful to say on their own. As Hall points out, her later short stories and novels focus on middle-class women "who could not reconcile their romantic desires, family loyalties, and feminist ambitions or, more negatively, transcend the catty, self-involved shrillness to which their race and class supposedly condemned them" ("Women Writers" 31-32). Thus, Lumpkin appears to have embraced criticism that only the working class and, "certainly not women like Lumpkin herself—were allowed to be the 'heroes of their own lives'" (32).

And yet, the working class were not "their own heroes," because Lumpkin speaks *for* them, *as* them, in her text. Lumpkin's sentimental proletarianism achieves a complex sympathetic identification that creates room for middle-class female subjectivity by creatively

inhabiting that which is deemed to have a voice by the proletarian realist movement: the masculine worker and the working-class “Other.” Thus, Lumpkin’s sentimentalism allows her to move from creating sympathy for the “Other” in order to bring them into social norms to combining this process with a simultaneous movement that creates space for the middle-class female voice. The sympathy created is twofold and complex, and it masks the layers of objectification and “Othering” that occur in the classed, gendered, and raced constructions of normative society.

CHAPTER 3

Not Plough-Shares but People: Josephine Johnson's *Now In November*

After her short story, "August Evening," in *The Atlantic Monthly* caught the eye of Clifton Fadiman at Simon and Schuster, Josephine Johnson was the subject of intense publisher courtship and eventually won a Pulitzer Prize in 1935 for *Now in November*, a novel that was praised for its poetic prose style and philosophical insight. In an atmosphere in which mainstream publishers were reluctant to publish radical novels, *Now in November* was hailed as a success for "its ripe understanding of things, places, and people, its unaffected sensitivity to the minutiae as well as to the major issues of life" (Rattray, "Johnson and Fadiman" 224). The major life issues for which Johnson was commended were actually fundamental class critiques in which she addresses a breakdown of capitalist faith and domestic harmony, but she frames her criticism in the form of a tragically reflective *bildungsroman*, avoiding the didactic Marxist tenor of conventional proletarian literary forms. Although proponents of proletarian realism often cast the genre in masculinized terms, Johnson achieved her critique and "unaffected sensitivity" by adopting the sentimental mode.

Like Grace Lumpkin, Johnson was able to write about both class and gender concerns in ways that challenged the conventional proletarian genre. Instead of focusing only on the male factory worker or on the consequences of organized labor strikes, *Now in November* depicts the particularly devastating consequences of capitalist failure and class inequality on those who are most vulnerable to it: women and children. Much like the plots of nineteenth-century sentimental novels, Johnson places women at the center of the family and, by revealing the ways in which

public social issues affect the family and the women in it, suggests that reform is urgently needed. The Haldmarne family is composed of a father, mother, and three daughters, one of whom narrates the novel, so that the family's struggle for survival on a Depression-era Midwestern farm is mediated through a feminine, familial lens. The mother serves as the spiritual and religious guide for her family, and her death prompts a crisis of faith for those who are left behind. The father fails as provider for his family, leaving them vulnerable to starvation, but *Now in November* makes it repeatedly clear that these failures are a result of the capitalist market system and not because of a lack of hard work. Much like the mill workers in *To Make My Bread*, the narrator of *Now in November* develops a proletarian sensibility because of her suffering and her awareness that other families suffer as hers does. Thus, Johnson's novel not only argues for sympathy for the working-class but also develops a critique of fundamental capitalist mythologies that require reform based on a sentimental, humanist ideology.

Capitalist Myth and Sentimental Ideology

Now in November is cast as retrospection on a mature young woman's journey to consciousness. At age twenty-five, Marget narrates the novel, looking back in November of the eleventh year of her family's tenure on the mortgaged Haldmarne farm. Although she immediately gestures toward the novel's status as a *bildungsroman*, she undercuts the conventional growth pattern of that form:

It has been a long year, longer and more full of meaning than all those ten years that were before it. There were nights when I felt that we were moving toward some awful and hopeless hour, but when that hour came it was broken up and confused because we were too near, and I did not even quite realize that it had come. (3)

Marget's reflective journey is a re-education of the self, tracing the evolution of her consciousness through events that appear "strange and unrelated and made no pattern that a

person could trace easily” (4). It does not follow a linear progression. Instead, the novel is punctuated with flashbacks and reminiscences that reveal a collective learning process rather than straightforward sequences of individual development.

Marget is the primary revolutionary consciousness in the novel, but she comes to her awareness through a combination of her family’s collective experience and her own introspection. She does not lead her family toward understanding but instead acts as a quiet observer, a recorder of circumstances that drive her family further from security. Her narrative position as an adult who reflects on the past allows her to occupy both childlike and adult perspectives, managing to embellish a child’s evenhanded storytelling with adult perceptions and insight. Johnson’s technique allows Marget to overlay the story with observations that imaginatively and sympathetically reach into her parents’ and sisters’ psyches and, in turn, reflect her own. Marget observes her father’s struggle to accept his economic downturn: “It’s a queer experience for a man to go through, to work years for security and peace, and then in a few months’ time have it all dissolve into nothing; to feel the strange blankness and dark of being neither wanted nor necessary any more” (6). She also describes, and takes solace in, her mother’s quiet faith: “She felt things as much as he did, wanted comfort, and yet could more easily do without. A curious warm aliveness under and over some inner core that was not attached to it . . . more wholly alive because less dependent on life” (167). While Marget relies on, and loses, her mother’s faith, these insights into her parents’ consciousness reveal the way in which she seeks to comprehend the interconnectedness of their emotional lives.

Marget’s development is not entirely through observation and vicarious emotional connection with her family; her journey toward revolutionary awareness also follows first-hand experiences. Published in 1934 and chronicled as a yearlong reflection with flashbacks over the

course of the previous decade, the story is set in the early 1930s and reaches back into the early 1920s. The Haldmarne family is caught in the Depression-era economic downturn and retreats to an isolated Midwestern farm community before Marxist ideas have become widespread, so they have not been exposed to common 1930s radical thought. The family's closest exposure to contemporary ideology is a brief period during which Grant, who works the farm with Arnold Haldmarne, attends "meetings at night up in the school" and forces Arnold to participate in a milk strike that raises prices but not profits (128). By isolating the family and limiting their exposure to local strike activities, Johnson focuses on the circumstances that force Marget and her family into a recognition of the devastating effects of the socioeconomic system in which they are caught. Marget repeatedly meditates on her desire for a sense of security that is always just out of reach: "It would have taken so little to make us happy. A little more rest, a little more money—it was the nearness that tormented" (37).

At the heart of Marget's revolutionary development is the critique of the capitalist myth in the security and salvation of the land. Unlike the McClures who feel that ownership of land provides them economic security but do not establish an emotional connection with it, Marget and the other Haldmarne daughters feel a spiritual connection to the land that is disrupted by their economic and material hardships. In establishing an emotional bond with the land, *Now in November* suggests that capitalist myths are based upon a sentimental ideology that assumes people can establish an affectional bond with the natural world—that nature can be included in the human family, that it not only provides spiritual renewal but that it participates in a cycle of caretaking in which human beings receive sustenance if they, in turn, cultivate the land.

Marget feels particularly betrayed by the cycle of labor and debt that undercuts any renewal or sustenance offered by nature:

And then it came to me as it did at times when the woods seemed all answer and healing and more than enough to live for, that maybe they wouldn't always be ours—that a drouth or a too-wet year or even a year over-good when everyone else had too much to sell—could snatch them away from us, and a scratch on a piece of paper could cancel a hundred acres and all our lives. (68)

Because she lives in an agricultural environment, Marget is surrounded by the natural world and feels a connection to it. The unpredictability of nature and attempts to cultivate the land for food production, however, create an untenable living situation. Nature's erratic bounty and parsimony, as well as market factors, prevent farmers from profiting on either a good or a bad crop and undermine any sense of stability that could be located in the land. Nature is not a sentimental entity, nor can it support the "bargain" the capitalist myth implies. Marget cannot depend on the land for security because crop value is determined by the capitalist market, reducing crops to "a scratch on a piece of paper" that diminishes the worth of their physical reality and highlights land's ephemeral nature.

Marget is angered by the sense of impermanence, the lack of ownership over the labor invested in the land, and the cyclical nature of production. Although capitalism mythologizes land's restorative properties and overemphasizes agriculture's food production, Marget undercuts that myth by emphasizing that the farmer is merely a laborer whose true labor product is the work itself:

There was a bitterness in sowing and reaping, no matter how good the crop might be . . . when all that it meant was the privilege of doing this over again and nothing to show but a little mark on paper. And there was the need, the awful longing, for some sort of permanence and surety; to feel that the land you ploughed and sowed and lurched over was your own and not gone out from under your feet by a cipher scratch. (76)

Marget seeks connection and security, finding disappointment in the cycle of production, loss, and renewal in the work of agricultural production. She describes the ironic fruitlessness of their labor: "The debt was still like a bottomless swamp unfilled, where we had gone year after year,

throwing in hours of heat and the wrenching on stony land, only to see them swallowed up and then to creep back and begin again” (35).

Suffering Fatherhood: “I would feel us there on his shoulders, heavy as stone on his mind”

One of the ways in which Johnson dismantles fundamental capitalist mythologies is her presentation of Arnold Haldmarne as a failed breadwinner who suffers because of his inability to provide for and protect his family. Whereas sentimental literature rarely considers the emotional responses of its failed and absent providers, women’s proletarian literature has often critiqued the ways in which social inequality is harmful to both men and women. However, proletarian writing frequently focuses on the way that men’s anger translates into violence and abuse at home. These texts portray women sympathetically, but because men are the perpetrators of violence and abuse against their wives and children, it is difficult to cast them as sympathetic. Such characterizations often do not explore men’s emotional responses to suffering. Arnold, however, is not presented as a violent man. His anger and frustration are turned inward, and the novel offers a sympathetic portrait of this working-class man’s emotional life.

Throughout *Now in November*, Arnold is frustrated and angry that his continuous labor does not result in security or stability. Although he constantly works to produce a crop, his efforts are often thwarted by poor weather. Or, if he successfully manages a large harvest, he finds that market forces inhibit his ability to profit from it: “If it’s good . . . so’ll everyone else’s be. Land’ll be drowned in corn You ought to be able to sell all the stuff you raise!” (50). He finds similar problems with his dairy enterprise; even though the principles of supply-and-demand dictate that suppliers should make higher profits when resources are scarce, he doesn’t make more money when milk supplies are low. Dairies and stores may increase selling prices,

but they don't raise what they pay the suppliers: "Milk was scarcer everywhere, but we didn't get much more at the dairy than before. Last year there had been too much, and all farmers had it This year nobody had very much, but the price didn't seem to change—not at the back door of the dairy anyway" (101-02). Arnold is forced into competition with his neighbors because they are all trying to sell the same products; their participation in the agricultural market contributes to price fluctuations, but they are all vulnerable to those changes: "Prices went up, we heard again, but Dad got no more for his milk and got less for the cows he sold, since nearly all other farmers were selling off" (143).

Traditionally, property ownership has been believed to be a marker of middle-class wealth because of the land's value. Farmers are thought to have more security because they own the land on which they work and they receive the majority of the profits from their labor. Furthermore, agricultural production provides farmers and their families with direct access to food, unlike, it is presumed, laborers who work in urban industrialized settings who must purchase food from stores. Johnson deliberately undermines Arnold's ability to provide in this manner, revealing that property ownership and agricultural labor are not the protections that capitalist mythology purports them to be. The farm, though "owned by Haldmarnes since the Civil War" (4), is mortgaged, and the crop's profit needs to cover not only the family's cost of living and the working costs of the farm, but also the cost of the mortgage. The land represents promise, but the mortgage's financial contract shifts ownership of the land to a bank, so that the cycle of labor benefits a company rather than the farmer: "Here was the land and the spring air full of snow melting, and yet the beginning of fear already He had not told her the place was mortgaged, and the land at least she had thought, was unencumbered, and sanctuary though everything else was gone."

In addition to the mortgage, the Haldmarnes are responsible for annual property taxes. Marget observes the tax assessor's visit, facing a clear discrepancy between his understanding of the property and the actual "wealth" of the Haldmarne farm. Mr. Braille is aptly named because he reads the list of assets—"the plows and tractor . . . a hundred sheep . . . nine hogs . . . a hundred chickens" (219)—and notes buildings and property, but he lacks the ability to see that the livestock are not profitable and the buildings store no harvest. Braille observes, "You folks are pretty well off," but Arnold counters, "[t]hem barns are empty. That silo's only three-quarter full. I have to buy feed this winter." Frustrated, Arnold asks, "If a man's no income, how's he going to pay property taxes?" (221). He cannot protect his family just by owning land because outside capitalist forces impose financial requirements that must be met, and this debt can only be satisfied by a profit margin that is produced by a market favorable to farmers. In fact, by mortgaging the property, Arnold passes the instability and risk onto future generations who must continue to pay the debt after he is no longer able to labor at his full physical capacity: "I saw Father with awful clearness as he would be soon. Old and querulous and able only to shell beans in the sun. And I saw how the debt would be Merle's and mine to carry by ourselves—how many years I do not know, but for a long and uncounted time" (230).

Although *Now in November* is a proletarian novel, Arnold doesn't find simple solutions to his problems in Marxist organizing. Forced to participate in a dairy strike in which farmers must hold back or dump hundreds of gallons of milk, he is angry about the waste as well as the lack of change to his precarious situation:

Whether the strike was won or lost nobody ever was sure. Prices went up a cent and we started selling again, but there was another tax to pay and a change in the graded value which canceled the feeble rise Father couldn't quite realize what had happened until he balanced his books at the month's end, and there was this three-day strike leaving an empty hole on the page. (132)

Since labor reform is less of an issue for farmers who work for themselves, Marxist organizers focus on raising prices. However, the proletarian message of Johnson's novel suggests that working-class problems in a farming community cannot be solved just by striking for better market shares. After all, Willa Haldmarne asks, "What if it does shove the prices up? . . . We get more and somebody else pays more. Where's the sense in that?" (129). Raising prices shifts costs, but it doesn't address the systemic problems that have undermined the value of owning property and trapped the Haldmarnes, and families like them, in a system of ceaseless labor and debt where neighbor is pitted against neighbor and food is thrown away in an effort to raise prices.

In many nineteenth-century sentimental novels men are portrayed as failed providers that are self-serving and callously abandon their responsibilities toward dependent women and children. Johnson, however, provides a version of the sentimental father as one who fails as a provider, not because he abandons his responsibilities, but because he is prevented by outside forces from meeting his obligations. As such, he suffers over his failures and this suffering inhibits his ability to connect emotionally with his family. Thus, like Lumpkin, Johnson reveals that the economic and social forces that destroy working class families also impact their emotional bonds.

Arnold's experiences have made him hard and bitter. After growing up on the farm, he had left to work in lumber factories and found moderate success: he'd "saved and come up hard and slow like an oak or ash that grows with effort but is worth much more than any poplar shooting two feet high in a season" (6). But after losing everything in the Depression, "he was chopped back down to root again . . . Things had come slow to him and gone fast, and it made him suspicious even of the land." Arnold moved his family back to the farm in a desperate

attempt to survive, to provide for them, and to recapture the elusive American Dream promising that hard work will produce security. But he finds only ceaseless labor: “My father’s life had been a sort of fierce crawling to rid us of debt before that time when even the effort would be too heavy for him. He wanted some safety for us, freedom from that fear and doubt he had always known himself” (35).

Because of his fear and doubt and because he is barely able to provide a subsistence living for his family—let alone pull them out of debt—all of Arnold’s energies are devoted to his work. It is through his labor that he shows care for his family: “This heavy, complaining labor with doubtful profit was almost the only visible sign of love he had ever showed us. But it was one that I’d never doubted” (36). The hardship of that work, however, costs Arnold his emotional relationship with his family; he is brusque and distant towards his daughters, directing them to complete chores and unable to connect to them: “we could not see the heaviness of his responsibility or know the probe of that fear which made him want security at the expense of our happiness.—I think sometimes that he would have been a milder, more patient man had there been some sons instead of nothing but girls talk all the time and women-voices.” Marget suspects that Arnold feels isolated because he is surrounded by women. But, more likely, the lack of sons adds to his fear because of gendered divisions of labor: without sons to help him in manual tasks, Arnold is forced to conduct all the labor on the farm himself or expend scarce resources to hire outside help. However, he also suffers because his failure to provide is a perceived failure of his masculinity, which connects the ability to support one’s family with manhood: “He felt too that we blamed him because there was nothing left but this land out of everything he had piled together for years; but the truth was that we never thought about this But he was so raw in mind himself that he suspected us all” (37).

Thus, Marget and the children both love and hate, pity and fear their father, because they witness his suffering and understand the source of his pain. By revealing that Arnold's anger is a result of his fear and his desperate desire to provide for his family, *Now in November* draws a sympathetic portrait of the sentimental father who loves his family and suffers over his inability to provide for them. He, in turn, causes additional suffering because of his inability to hide or release his despair and rage, making the home an uncomfortable and uncertain place. *Now in November* constantly underscores the source of Arnold's suffering, making clear that he lashes out at those closest to him even though they are not the source of his pain. Even as he scorns his wife's attempts to advise him on how to manage after a field hand suddenly quits, Marget observes the fear underneath his anger: "It was awful—the rage he felt; but it wasn't the anger so much as the despair that made us afraid" (50). Arnold's anger and fear leave him impatient with his daughters and quick to temper. Although never overtly violent and not a physical threat to his family, the constant presence of his anger and his quick turns to rage leave them insecure and worried in his presence: "He seldom swore aloud, thought it was wrong to do before his girls;—but all the blasphemy was there, bursting and turning sour inside" (65). Marget "never got used to his sick impatience, and felt racked all the time with hate and pity . . . with the tired look on his face that made me want to cry at times, although I was quick to hate him when he would turn on us suddenly and shout" (52). Despite their fear and hate, the girls love their father and understand that Arnold's intense anger comes from impotent rage at the unfair system that traps him as well as his ever-present concern for his family: "all the time I would feel us there on his shoulders, heavy as stone on his mind—all four of our lives to carry everywhere. And no money." Thus, Marget sympathizes with her father's pain, loving him despite his anger and his emotional distance: "Dad looked at Mother, and I saw the awful unmasking of his face, as if all

the underground terror and despair were brought to the surface by his hope, and I felt a jab of pity and love for him stronger than I'd ever known before" (153). By showing Arnold's despair and his daughter's sympathy, Johnson argues that working-class fathers are equally subject to emotional suffering caused by the material conditions of poverty.

Faithful Motherhood: "I had believed because she had"

Women serve a significant role as spiritual and moral leaders in nineteenth-century sentimental novels. The spiritual organization of these novels is credited with aiding a cultural, religious shift from the pulpit into the home and establishing women as moral and religious authorities in family and society. Although, as a proletarian text, *Now in November* does not endorse a specific religious or theological viewpoint, it does suggest a humanist philosophy that is primarily advocated by Marget's mother. While Marget herself struggles to embrace her mother's faith, Johnson presents her uncertainty as a logical result of the pressures of poverty and working-class struggle. Marget's mother, like the women of nineteenth-century novels, is a feminized Christ-like figure who embodies a sympathetic, humanist ideal.

Willa Haldmarne is the emotional and moral center of her family. She possesses an inherent calmness and quiet faith that enables her to weather hardships more easily than her husband, passing this ability to endure onto her children through her example:

Mother sat there very quiet. He had not told her the place was mortgaged . . . But even in the moment, when she saw that this, too, was uncertain and shifting ground, something she always had—something I didn't know then and may never know—let her take it quietly. A sort of inner well of peace. Faith I guess it was. She stood a great deal and put up with much, but all without doubt or bitterness; and that she was there, believing and not shaken, or not seeming so at least, was all that we needed to know. (5)

By demonstrating a quiet acceptance, Willa calms her daughters, allowing them to "forget for the time this sense of impermanence and doubt." While her husband inwardly rages at the unfairness

of their spiraling debt and the ever-present threat of starvation, Willa experiences their poverty differently. Although she worries and suffers hardships, her different beliefs about humanity enable her to endure more peacefully: “She felt things as much as he did, wanted comfort, and yet could more easily do without. A curious warm aliveness under and over some inner core that was not attached to it...more wholly alive because less dependent on life” (167).

Marget’s mother makes everyone feel welcome and safe at home—despite any fights and tension among the girls or their father—and they confide freely in her: “Mother never talked much herself, but listened to everything that was said, and it made us feel there was a reason in talking because she was there to hear” (17). She encourages her daughters to share their feelings and—as avid readers—develop their minds: “Nobody else we had ever met cared as much for all of the things that were there to know and be talked about—the wheeling of planets and the meaning of bonds, or the kind of salts that the chickens needed and the names of the great Victorian poets.” She supports the girls with laughter and affection; although they are often uncertain of their father’s reaction to their efforts, they know she will appreciate any attempt they make to please her. When Marget teaches Merle to recite a long poem, they “hoped that Father would laugh because it was supposed to be funny in some places, but we knew that Mother would anyway” (21). And when making a birthday present for her father, Marget hopes to please him but wishes that the present “was for Mother, knowing that she would like anything we made” (22).

Willa is highly attuned to the feelings of others, not only responding to her daughters’ moods and emotional needs but also extending sympathy outside of the immediate family. She frequently intercedes between her high-spirited and different daughters, smoothing over spats and trying to sow peace between them. She notices even unspoken anxiety, offering gentle and

practical help to ease worries, such as when the girls eagerly await their father's birthday: "Merle did not ask Is this the day? each morning, but Mother could see how she was fearful of not recognizing it, and so taught her how to mark the days on the calendar each night" (25). She is so attuned to the feelings of others that Marget characterizes her as living "in the lives of other people as though they were her own" (16). Thus, when Kerrin has yet another confrontation with her father and storms out of the room, Willa is hurt by her daughter's pain: "it was like being bruised inside each time." Willa's sympathy is so strong that her daughter repeats this assessment when describing Willa's concern over a missing field hand. Willa doesn't share Arnold's anger that Max Rathman has quit and left him without help on the corn harvest, instead worrying that his absence may be a result of illness or injury: "She saw him sick, hurt to death, wagon-pitched and already dying. She lived in the lives of others as though she hadn't one of her own" (49).

Her sympathy prompts Willa to advocate a charitable philosophy in spite of the Haldmarne's own poverty. Like Lumpkin's working-class mothers who attempt to stretch scarce resources, Willa knows that her family continuously teeters on the brink of starvation and tries to do as much as possible with the little they have. Her traditional wifely role is to take charge of cooking and managing domestic resources, so she cans produce to save for winter and makes food supplies last as long as possible. With very little cash, they cannot afford to buy food or other supplies from the store. Thus, she is careful with their resources but willing to share with Grant, the new hired hand, despite Merle's concern about having an additional person to feed: "'This'll be a good year,' Mother answered. 'We'll have good enough to eat anyway. Food enough if nothing to wear' She looked worried, though, and I saw her go back and recount the jars, as if by doing it over often enough she could make them more" (75). When, at times, the

farm produces more food than the family can eat or sell, Willa advocates for sharing with others, regardless of whether it will bring them a profit. After canning cherries with too many left to be sold because “the Union markets were overflowed,” Willa instructs her daughters to “Give them away Better than swelling the jays and worms. Somebody’ll take them if it don’t cost” (115). When the family is told to dump hundreds of gallons of milk during the strike—or be forced to—she argues that they should “Give it away then Give it out on the street. They oughtn’t to stop you doing that!” (130).

Willa’s sympathetic desire to give to others contrasts her husband’s despair over a lack of reciprocal charity; Arnold suggests that this kind of giving doesn’t work because they do not live within a communist system of exchange: “A man can’t afford to give when nobody gives him back. You can’t work without profit when nobody around you does. I’d give for no cost if I could get back for nothing” (116). Indeed, while Willa advocates that the family give away food they cannot use or profit from, such random moments of excess occur infrequently and do not stem the tide of starvation and poverty that surrounds them because they all exist within a system that requires profit. Willa’s suffering comes not just from her own struggle to keep her family alive, but the way in which that struggle is magnified exponentially by all of the other families who suffer just as they do. Willa sees the effects of their poverty as a problem not just of starvation and struggle but also of community: “To us the horror of this poverty lay in the fear and the scraping that left mind and soul raw and quick to infection; but to Mother it was the shame of being unable to help, of standing by bound and helpless and seeing life make its assault on others” (159-60).

Willa’s belief in the need to help others stems from a personal faith that is vaguely based in the ideological foundation of Christian charity. Johnson, however, is careful to show that these

ideas do not require a strict adherence to the church. Regular church attendance is difficult to manage because of the demands of the farm: “The minister used to come once a month to preach, and for a whole year after we’d moved on the land Mother had wanted to go and hear him, but there always seemed something else that had to be done—always a calf or a meal or a jarring that could not wait—the farm like a querulous, sick old man whining for attention every hour” (134).

However, once Willa is able to bring her daughters to services (while Arnold stays home),

Marget observes that the minister shouts about sin while her mother was

sitting there, listening quiet, but more as though she were having some inner communion of her own, feeding and watering some faith of which the organ and church and minister were only the symbol and surroundings. She listened only to hear the sound of faith in his voice, and not to the words that meant little or nothing. (139)

As Johnson draws it, the minister and church are only outward symbols of a deeper faith, one that stems from somewhere deep within Willa. She “trusted in something a person could neither feel nor see, but knew” and demonstrated “a sort of faith in the dignity of human spirit” (82, 145). In fact, Willa and her daughters are abruptly asked to leave the church when they begin preparations for communion. A deacon approaches, whispering and then repeating more loudly until the whole congregation stares, “You’ll have to get out . . . You don’t belong to the church. Only church-members take communion” (140). During the service, Willa’s face held “a rapt and luminous light,” but standing outside, staring at the closed church doors, she “looked as if she had lost some irreplaceable thing and had been jerked back suddenly into life, and empty-handed” (140, 141). While sitting in church, Willa engages with a communal spiritual experience, connecting to a larger emotional and spiritual bond of gathering more than with the theological message expounded by the minister at the front of the room. Thus, not only is the church—the religious institution—not the true source of Willa’s illumination, but in casting her out, the church itself becomes another symbol of social power that inhibits instead of encourages

faith by drawing lines between people.

As a mother, as the moral and emotional center of her family, Willa models humanist philosophy—the idealized communist spirit. Her faith is desirable but it does little to enact real change and proves ultimately unsustainable. Willa’s life is cut tragically short when she is hurt helping the family fight a wildfire that threatens their acreage and their home; she is burned badly and lingers for a few weeks before eventually dying. Like Stowe’s Little Eva, Willa is a model of goodness that inspires others but lives according to a belief system that is difficult—if not impossible—for most to sustain. The fire, which consumes forests, fields, and houses, reveals the family’s and community’s helplessness against larger forces that can affect every element of their lives and ignores the artificial, man-made boundaries set between work and home spaces. While desperate workers move “against the fire like furious black ants,” Willa falters and is caught by the merciless fire that, like the capitalist system, is indifferent to human kindness (193).

Whereas Little Eva’s death inspired near-instant conversion among her followers, Willa’s life and death prompts her daughter Marget to engage in a more complex reflection on the relationship between her humanist philosophy and their lived reality. Marget is open about her struggles, wishing to feel the same way as her mother but unable to fully accept her faith. She longs to share her mother’s beliefs, not so much wishing to share a specific theological viewpoint so much as she desires to possess the same calmness and ability to weather struggles and hardship: “I wanted to believe as she did, quietly, very steadfast, without reasoning or beyond reason, with a faith that seemed as much part of her as her hands or face” (139). As a critical observer who carefully examines the positions and beliefs of both her parents, Marget’s doubts offer a moderated perspective on two emotional options facing the working-class family:

frustration and rage over the unfairness or quiet faith in human dignity. While Marget prefers her mother's peace, she is unable to ignore the realities of labor and suffering her family experiences. Thus, when she observes her sister Kerrin—prone to fights and lashing out—greedily eating spoonfuls of jelly straight from the jar, Marget considers that

there were hours of sun and hours of picking and hot hours on a stove all gone into those few minutes of Kerrin's swallowing and would become a part of her, giving her energy to hate and use loud words and tears; and I wondered how Mother's faith would answer that, for it seemed to make the pattern of things more distorted than before. (62)

How, Marget wonders, does one reconcile the reality of work, labor, and deprivation with a belief in human goodness, when humans still fail and still suffer?

Willa's death is not quick, nor is it painless. Her burns are severe, and the family has few resources to aid her beyond a burn salve and a doctor that offers false hope. There was no way to ease her pain, "no way for anyone to get between her and the suffering" (192). Although Willa endures without complaint, Marget sympathizes so deeply with her suffering that she must find a limit in order to bear it:

I used to sit up at night beside her, and at first it was almost too hard. It was awful—the pain she suffered. Hours and days of agony enough to turn her mind, and yet she seldom said anything aloud. I thought sometimes I should scream out myself, suffering for her and half-crazy with pity and helplessness. But there is a merciful blind skin that comes over the heart at times. You can endure this much, and after that there come intervals of hardness. (214)

Marget both sympathizes deeply with her mother's suffering and must "blind" her heart to the pain to survive; thus, there are limits to sympathy and too much sympathy can become a destructive force if the shared suffering is too great. Despite her pain, Willa remains a sentimental model. She "has no doubt, no fear in her own mind," and continues to think about the welfare of others. Even as her "mind wandered off in a web of pain," in her clear moments she asks about her husband, wanting to know if he rests or eats enough: "He's too wound up.

Work brings so little anyway Tell him to rest” (223).

The loss of Willa results in a crisis of faith for Marget: “I could not pretend or hope any longer, or believe blindly in any goodness. It was all gone. Faith swept away like a small mound of grass, and nothing to live or wait for any longer. God was only a name, and it was her life that had been the meaning of that name. Now there was nothing left” (224). Instead of inspiring Marget to look to heaven for a reunion, Marget sees only additional loss, more evidence that the world was empty and indifferent to their suffering: “I had believed because she had, and if she lost it and came to the darkness where we were, groping along with no more light than I,—then all of my blind belief in goodness was gone But all of this was nothing beside the unbearable feeling of loss” (225). Although, as Marget says, “we have gone on living” after Willa’s death, the loss of her mother and the loss of her faith takes the joy out of her world, transforming it into a ceaseless cycle of labor:

There is nothing majestic in our living. The earth turns in great movements, but we jerk about on its surface like gnats, our days absorbed and overwhelmed by a mass of little things Our hours of life snatched from our years of living. Intervals and things stolen between things which are necessary to make life endurable?—fed, washed, and clothed, to enjoy the time which is not washing and cooking and clothing. (226)

Marget’s loss of faith prompts a new realization about the humanist philosophy undergirding her mother’s beliefs. As she reflects on the ways in which their lives have been emptied of hope, as well as the peace and beauty they used to find in nature, she comes to realize that they “are not trapped any more than all other men. Any more than life itself is a trap” (226-27). Marget not only begins to place herself and her family within the context of all of humanity’s struggle for survival, but she considers that the world is indifferent to their collective suffering:

Was there anything that we could have done that we did not do? God—if you choose to say that the drouth is God—against us. The world against us, not deliberately perhaps,

more in a selfish than malicious way, coming slowly to recognize that we are not enemies or plough-shares. And we against ourselves. It is not possible to go on utterly alone. (227)

Marget, thus, combines both her father's critique of a capitalist market system that profits from the laborer but does not help him—the selfish world—and her mother's faith in human dignity—being impossible to go on alone. Marget, in turn, develops a new faith, a budding revolutionary consciousness that will enable her to endure and possibly to change the world that has caused so much suffering: "Love and the old faith are gone But there is the need and the desire left, and out of these hills they may come again. I cannot believe this is the end if this is only consolation of a heart in its necessity, or that easy faith born of despair, it does not matter, since it gives us courage somehow to face the morning. Which is as much as the heart can ask at times" (231). Through the heart, through feeling, comes a new faith and a proletarian humanism that offers a new hope to Marget, her family, and to the working-class.

"no better off than the rest of us": Drawing Parallels Among Working-Class Families

Now in November consistently draws parallels between the Haldmarnes and other working-class families, showing that the ways in which these families differentiate themselves—drawing boundaries between who is safe and who is vulnerable—are both fluid and meaningless. All of the families in the novel are subject to market pressures, to natural disasters, and to personal shortfalls. By revealing the ways in which families believe their suffering is unique but that they are, in fact, alike and equally vulnerable, Johnson further demonstrates that capitalist beliefs fail for everyone, and that they would all benefit from the same systemic reforms and human charity. Showing that all working-class families suffer also enables Johnson to develop a sentimental argument that crosses race boundaries, demonstrating that working-class African American families are not only subject to the same problems as white families but that racism

places them even more at risk.

Throughout *Now in November* Johnson deconstructs the capitalist myth of security in the land by showing that it does not guarantee sustenance or survival for the Haldmarne family who farm it. When the family encounters officials who represent this mythology, such as the tax assessor, they logically (if frustratedly) point to the flaws in his valuation of the property. But when a beggar approaches Arnold and his daughters in the fields asking to work in exchange for food, Arnold finds him threatening because he not only espouses that same mythology, but he also represents what the family could easily become. The beggar shows them a few half-rotted sweet potatoes he has collected and exclaims, “You farmers have got food anyway I got a family. We have to eat” (78). Marget’s father is swift to point out that “A farmer’s pinched as any man,” but the beggar frightens him, representing “what might have happened . . . if there hadn’t been land to save us, and reminding him, too, of what might happen still” (79). Although the Haldmarnes are “saved” from utter starvation by their access to property, their precarious position reveals that land itself is not total refuge from hunger and destitution. Although Arnold calls the man a “lying loafer,” it is clear that the man is willing to work but is out of options and resources; the distance between the beggar’s family and the Haldmarnes is not very great. While both the girls and their father feel fear, Arnold reacts with anger but the girls feel pity: “I was afraid of him and felt sorry for him” (78). They secretly go to the house and take potatoes, carrots, and an apple from the cellar, but although they cut across the field to catch him, he does not hear them calling or crying: “I couldn’t for fear or shame have called again. And then he turned the corner and was gone out of sight” (80).

Although the beggar makes Marget and her family feel fear, the Rathmans, their prosperous German neighbors, cause Marget to feel envious. The Rathmans are not significantly

wealthier than the Haldmarnes, but to Marget they appear happier, safer, and more secure: “They seemed so solid and sage, and needed so little . . . Their land was their own entirely and had no debt. Whatever grew on it belonged to them and went to pay back no unseen owner” (96-97). Marget pays more attention to their crops of strawberries and grapes as well as the wine that “Old Rathman” produces, not recognizing that the Rathmans are equally close to the line between security and destitution, that a family tragedy or a market crash could easily destroy their seemingly comfortable working life: “I wondered what it was like to live safe. Out of debt. I could not believe that they had their own rawness, too, something bad under all this white-looking comfort” (98). Marget differentiates families like hers, who work mortgaged properties and owe debts on the land, from those that seem to be debt free, without recognizing the precariousness of both positions: “Here were all of us then, I thought, crawling along the ruts and shoving our debts ahead like the ball of dung-beetles. Worse off than the beetles themselves who can bury their load and be done.—All of us but the Rathmans, anyway. They’re safe, I thought, padded in from fear. They have only to work for the now, and not pay for the years behind” (100).

But after Old Rathman falls and breaks his hip their entire farm is placed in jeopardy; while Rathman may not need to pay a mortgage, he is still responsible for feeding his family and covering such costs as property taxes, electric bills, and the purchase of farm equipment, clothing, or other material goods. Although one of Rathman’s sons moves home with his wife, “on account of the rent being free,” they refuse to help Mrs. Rathman with the full load of farm and house work. Picked beans go to waste instead of being sold because Lena Rathman doesn’t have time to take them to market and feels she’s “done enough” to help her in-laws, while Max and Lena keep the money for themselves when they do take strawberries in, so there’s no money

for bills. The farm “looked going-apart, too, sliding to seed” with maintenance neglected because Old Rathman can’t get out of bed (172). Marget realizes that the Rathmans are equally vulnerable to disaster, placing them in the same precarious position as anyone else: “Old Rathman’s accident had seemed a sudden and awful thing, wrenching away the thickness of their comfort and leaving them now no better off than the rest of us. Even worse off, perhaps” (169). While Arnold blames Old Rathman for his accident, claiming that he “puttered around too long—had head spinnings before Won’t never quit work till he can’t lift a hand or foot,” Marget sees the parallels between Rathman and her father: “—*Like you*, I wanted to say. Father wasn’t well and he worked too hard” (167). Marget knows that the desperation to survive causes Rathman and Arnold to make similar choices, perhaps at the expense of their health and the family’s future security. The Rathmans are different from the Haldmarnes only by degree, which causes Marget to wonder “if there was peace and security anywhere on the earth” (172). Although hyperbolic, Marget’s statement suggests a shared insecurity among all families: no one is completely invulnerable.

The Ramseys are an African American family who are nearby tenant farmers. Reflecting the powerful but elusive American Dream, they hope to own their farm some day despite the fact that they continue to fall further and further behind: “For ten years Ramsey had rented land and expected to buy, but all that he ever did was make his rent money and put up half the crop to go over the winter But every spring Lucia boomed out that *this* was the year they were going to make it” (121). Tenant farming is even more difficult because farmers must pay rent to the landowner in addition to a portion of their crop, which means they keep less than half of what they grow (which is further reduced if the landowner charges them for seed or supplies). As with a mortgage, they will always owe rent to the landowner, regardless of what happens to the crop.

Unable to make rent, Ramsey asks his neighbors for help, but the “wealthy” Rathmans are unable to provide aid: “I got land and vegetables, but no money! . . . The old lady give him a jar of pickles but no money” (99). When Christian Ramsey turns to another neighbor for help, Grant Koven first advises him not to pay, protesting because the price is exploitative, “too big a rent.” But Ramsey points out that his family would be treated more harshly and given no leniency because of his race: “‘Let’m try to shove you off and see what’ll happen,’ he’d said. Christian was scared, though, and not willing to risk it. ‘Maybe you could get by all right,’ he told Grant,—‘you ain’t a nigger. You don’t have a wife and seven children. A nigger can’t wait and see what’ll happen. He *knows!*’”

Although it angers him to contribute to a system of exploitation, paying off Turner, “who didn’t need it and who’d dangled the debt over Christian’s head until he was raw as a Negro could get,” Grant provides the money because he “couldn’t stand by and do nothing just because you thought it was wrong for a man to be trapped that way” (99-100). Grant’s own family, though, is in debt—two years behind in their taxes—and won’t be able to offer help to the Ramseys again. The differences between the debtors and the creditors is only in degree: although the government isn’t dangling the Koven’s debt over them, it does trap everyone in an unfair system and threatens the Kovens with the loss of their farm. When the Ramseys are forced to seek help a second time, Christian approaches Arnold Haldmarne, but he is unable to offer them assistance: “I’d help you some if I had it, but I ain’t I ain’t a cent to spare” (157). Arnold asks if any other family can help, but Ramsey says no one is able or willing: “I been every place before. I been up to the county, but they tol’ me so long as I don’ need food that I got to manage.” Not only are the families in similar circumstances—no one has any money—but the only aid anyone can offer is in the form of food. The irony is that farmers do produce food,

enabling them to survive—if barely—but if they cannot sell the food and produce cash, they are not able to stay on the land that produces the food that sustains them: “food wouldn’t pay off rent” (158). Watching the Ramseys struggle, Marget considers that their situation is a more extreme version of her own: “it occurred to me that we seemed to them as the Rathmans did to us. Safe. Comfortable. Giving the appearance of richness, with our dairy and corn and chickens, our steers and team and orchard—although each thing was barely paying to keep itself” (122).

When the Ramseys are eventually evicted, Grant pleads with Turner but achieves nothing. Turner’s racism justifies, in his mind, putting the family out: “Ramseys don’t make good tenants Don’t know how to get most off the farm. Anyone else’d have managed Niggers make poor tenants A white man would have managed” (158-59). Grant points out the flaw in this race-based reasoning, asking if “niggers kept rain off their land” to show the ludicrousness in the idea that a white farmer could have managed the crop-destroying drought any more effectively (159). But by explaining that “nobody’d managed this year,” Grant also shows that white families are just as vulnerable to the weather conditions and the unfavorable market (158). African American and white families are equal in their capitalist vulnerability, subject to the pressures of working-class conditions. But African American families are subject to the additional burdens of racism, leaving them with fewer resources and options when things go badly. Merle, Marget’s sister, cries when Ramsey leaves, and “even Kerrin looked sick” because they sympathize with his family’s plight. As Marget watches the Ramseys in their overloaded wagon pull away, she considers the parallels between their families: “That’s what will happen to us We’ll go back crawling the same way we came” (166). Marget’s awareness of the similarities between the two families doesn’t stop with just the Ramseys; she understands that all working-class families struggle in similar ways and are subject to the same

pressures: “surely, I thought, we have the right to live as fully as anyone else! Are we and all those around us—the Ramseys and Huttons and Meisers and all the rest—any worse than people who have no fear, no slough to fill, are not pawns to drouth and frost? Why were we chosen to be so stinted?” (142).

Kerrin Haldmarne: The Madwoman on the Farm

Though Marget successfully navigates the progression of collective hardships that deny her security and force her critique of socioeconomic factors that undermine her family’s attempts to survive, they destroy her older sister, Kerrin. Although she struggles with her mother’s faith, Marget eventually finds hope in family and in the awareness that it is “not possible to go on utterly alone,” but her sister reveals the extreme consequences of a failure in family connection and social structure. Selfish and erratic, Kerrin lacks the ability to sympathize with others, which is a violation of traditional feminine sensibilities. It prevents her from emotionally or socially connecting with her family, and she further transgresses sentimental gender roles by protesting her limited ability to make economic decisions that affect the family or participate in traditionally masculine activities. Kerrin is unable to survive the family’s economic hardships or cope with her emotions. Rather than the locked-away “madwoman in the attic,” Kerrin is the “madwoman on the farm,” descending into depression, insanity, and eventual suicide. Her presence in the story represents a stunted consciousness and helps create an anti-*bildungsroman* that contrasts Marget’s emotional and intellectual development: Kerrin willfully fights against the social forces in which she is entrapped, spiraling downward in a cycle of mental and emotional decline from which her family cannot save her.

Described as Marget’s opposite physically and temperamentally, Kerrin is “beautiful in a

dark, odd way . . . with brown cold skin . . . wild colty eyes” and vibrant red hair (55). While Marget is the calm, reflective narrator throughout the novel, Kerrin is frequently compared to an animal, heightening the sense of unpredictability and danger that surrounds her:

She did things sudden and wildly, or not at all, and ate sometimes like a dog starved out and savage, chewing and mumbling, and at other times would only pick at her food and stare out the window while Merle and I ate patiently all that was put in front of us. She’d sleep at odd times and hours, stretched out like a lynx in the sun, and creep out of the house at night to wander around in the marshes. (24)

Kerrin is unchecked and uncontrollable, straining against convention and particularly vulnerable to the tightening strictures of the family’s economic stresses.

Kerrin frequently lashes out at her family, particularly her sisters, “always making scenes” and is quick to separate herself from them (11). Even though she is fast to take offense at any sense of wrongdoing, Marget suspects that “she wanted to feel accused of dark and secret things,” and chooses her words carefully, “embarrassed and half-afraid of what she might do to me” (11, 12). Kerrin’s fights with her family make it hard for them to connect with her, and they feel a sense of relief when she chooses to eat her meals alone and avoids the house. Her presence creates constant tension: “Even when she was quiet or reading, I could never find rest where Kerrin was. None of us could No matter in what sort of mood she was—and there were times when Kerrin was almost fiercely happy and kind—the tautness was never gone, the fear of what she might say or do” (40-41). Although Marget and Merle are close and loving with each other and would like to connect to their sister, her outbursts push them at times to darker feelings. Kerrin would “slam a door somewhere while we pretended not to hear and would go on with what we did, only sick and drawn inside with hate” (16). Kerrin is different from her family, and Marget hints that her behavior stems from something deeper, worrying that she “had never been like us much . . . she seemed more strange than ever, as though not belonging even to

herself” (24). Because Kerrin finds employment as a teacher, the family experiences some relief during the school year, but Marget finds herself dreading “the thought of her being home all day” once summer break begins: “It seemed to me even then That there was something more inerascably wrong with her than just a fierce selfishness and discontent” (39).

Although Marget repeatedly hints at madness as she reflects on Kerrin’s angry and erratic behavior, there are many indications that Kerrin feels utterly stifled by her life, which could also result in many of the actions that worry her sister. She “carried the root of her unrest with her . . . a poisoned thing that wasted its strength in pushing down here and there, and found only a shallow soil or one full of rocks wherever planted” (45-46). Kerrin actively protests against her status as a woman, repeatedly frustrated and angered by her father’s refusal to allow her to do masculine work:

[she] thought she could plough if Father’d let her. But he thought that a girl could never learn how and would only mess the field. “You help your mother, girls,” he’d say Kerrin was angry, felt things pounding in her, impotent and suppressed. (15)

Arnold scornfully ignores her opinion about which crops they should grow; her contributions to the labor of the daily farm work are unacknowledged until she neglects those tasks. Further, Kerrin attempts to impress her father on his birthday by giving him a knife and throwing it accurately at a target. However, when she surprises her father by demonstrating her skill, he is so enraged that he knocks the knife from her hand, causing it to fatally wound the family dog. Kerrin continually pushes at the boundaries of acceptable female behavior, and her rage and unpredictability are neither understood by her family nor openly addressed. Kerrin is silenced by her family, in turns ignored or repressed, with disastrous results.

It is not just her family who is grateful that Kerrin is hired to teach at the county school; Kerrin enjoys the work and for a time is content instructing the children: “She made a good

teacher, good because she understood all those lumpy children in so far as any but God could understand them, I guess, and held them all to her with a kind of hard leniency and discipline. She succeeded because she really cared about them” (41). But even Kerrin’s fondness for her students indicates a dissatisfaction with the gender roles that restrict her own life. Kerrin “liked the boys better because their faces were not so stupid and their minds clicked faster,” but the “girls were already vacant wives, she said, —not stolid, their tongues slapping around like wheels, but already bounded tight with convention” (42). Kerrin associates the boys with quick thinking, free to explore and not limited by the expectation of marriage or conventional roles, unlike the girls who reflect her own limited options. When not teaching, Kerrin spends most of her time reading, going “through the old books that the grandfathers used to own—old books that had page after page without a new paragraph or picture, and filled with philosophies obscure and gloomy She spent hours in reading them over and did not stop, as Merle and I did, at a certain page or time, or stop to do dishes and scabble in earth to make a garden” (45).

But eventually, Kerrin’s ability to distract herself with teaching comes to an end. Returning to teach school no longer soothes her, and she “seemed uncertain of what she wanted, furious and balked that she could not reach or do things of which she had no clear idea herself” (174). Concerned about her increasing restlessness, Marget delivers a message to the school and discovers that Kerrin is no longer teaching well. Kerrin is later dismissed because Willa insists Marget report to the school board that Kerrin isn’t “well or able to teach the children any more,” knowing that “we’d have to take the blame in the end” (183). Kerrin, thus, loses her position largely because of her family, and they try to endure Kerrin’s rage “when she came home confused with anger and humiliation” (184). Kerrin accuses Marget of reporting her and intending to take the job herself and refuses—or is unable to bring herself—to go back to

working on the farm: “What we asked her to do we could have done ourselves with less time and worry . . . there was so much still to do and we could not trust her even to haul the water. It was hard to see her around because of feeling pity; she looked like a thing scratched down to bone, moved by a kind of sourceless energy, not of her own strength any more” (184-85). With nowhere to direct her energies and with no options, Kerrin becomes increasingly unanchored.

Although Kerrin’s frustration and lack of agency cause her to withdraw from her family, widening the silence between them, she ironically appears to attempt to resolve her fears and frustration by falling in love, which would presumably result in the traditional role that she has continued to resist—that of wife and eventually mother. While it is possible Marget misinterprets her sister’s behavior by evaluating it through her own traditional perspective, Kerrin appears to hover outside the church doors on a family visit “hoping some fellow would speak to her” (135), and she eventually develops an unrequited obsession with Grant Koven. Marget speculates that Kerrin’s desire is that of possession—Kerrin “wanted him more than anything else she had ever snatched at. Because he was tangible, I suppose” (107). Marget herself has also fallen in love with Grant, but because Grant has fallen in love with Merle—who never returns his affection—no one establishes a complete affectional or marital relationship. Because of her own feelings for Grant, and because she fears and suspects Kerrin, Marget views Kerrin’s love as less real than her own, based in the selfish competitiveness she has always shown her sisters.

However, Kerrin’s attempts to connect with members of the church and her “snatches” at Grant stem from a desperate need to connect with others. Grant offers Kerrin the possibility of recognition, someone who loves and sees her true self: “she wanted love, —not anything we could give her, frugal and spinsterly, nor Father’s (having long ago stopped even hoping for it), but some man’s love in which she could see this image she had of herself reflected and thus

becoming half-true” (46). When her father ignores her planting advice, Kerrin seeks validation from Grant, although she fails to win it from him. She “waited for Grant to say she was right, but he only answered something about hill country and no rain She sat near him in a kind of hungry and yet hesitating way, but he didn’t move or turn toward her, only stared off after Dad” (168-69). Kerrin falls for Grant because he has the potential to acknowledge her within her family circle, particularly because he is accepted as an insider and yet is not a blood relative. She fights for his attention and his affection because she is lonely and because Grant provides her with the opportunity to resolve her marginalized position by redefining and validating her as a member of the family to which she cannot connect on her own.

Johnson draws Kerrin’s suicide as inevitable. She is unable to win Grant’s affection, making a “fool” of herself in front of him and becoming an object of scorn to her sisters. Grant not only doesn’t love her, but he shifts from liking Kerrin to politely tolerating her presence. After her mother is fatally burned fighting the wildfire, Kerrin loses the only person in the family who treats her with sympathy and affection. The depth of this loss is foreshadowed when Kerrin, who wanders outdoors at night, alerts the family of the impending danger but “suddenly—and strangely, for her—she snatched at Mother and tried to hold her back,” begging her not to go (190). In the aftermath of the fire, Kerrin is unable to escape the forces that have destroyed her sense of self, behaving as though “the fire had got inside her” (196). She attempts to kiss Grant—her only overt gesture of seduction—but is interrupted by Arnold. The reactions of the two men—Grant swiftly pulls away and her father angrily demands to know what is going on—mark Kerrin’s violation of her acceptable social role and abruptly return her to it. Responding with desperate rage, Kerrin later hurls a knife at her father—paralleling the scene of the ruined birthday dinner—misses, and grabs the knife off the ground as she runs away.

In these tumultuous moments, Kerrin not only lashes out but she reaches the end of her tolerance for her restricted life. She recognizes that Grant will never love her and is driven to madness—or further into madness—by the depth of her difference. It is her family’s failure to see her and the crushing pressure of their silence that destroys any possibility for her survival; her death becomes a blessing for them all: “There was no place for her She never belonged with us, and maybe there is no place on earth for people like her” (199-200). Later, Marget and Grant find Kerrin, who has died after cutting her wrists, on the ground behind the sheep barn, one arm resting in the water-trough, “staining the shallow water” (200). Though Arnold mourns his daughter, he does not comprehend her death, finding himself shocked by this last act of “raw, unnatural” willfulness, doing “a thing a girl had no right to do” (201). Yet that final image of Kerrin remains, a blood offering that serves as both a symbol of the unforgiving natural cycle against which her family has pitted their entire lives and the embodied personal cost of her individual struggle against overwhelming forces.

*A Truth Universally Acknowledged: A Man in Possession of No Fortune
Must Be in Want of a Job*

Josephine Johnson was just twenty-four years old when she submitted the manuscript of *Now in November* to her editor, Clifton Fadimon at Simon and Schuster, in the summer of 1934. It was her first novel, and Johnson was still a student at Washington University in St Louis. Johnson had been an aspiring writer since her childhood in Kirkwood, Missouri. From the early 1930s, her stories and poems began appearing in national magazines, and based on the strength of her early writing, such publishers as Simon and Schuster, the Atlantic Monthly Press, Scribner’s, and Macmillan had all sought to publish Johnson’s first book-length project. *Now in November* appeared in September 1934 to a great deal of enthusiasm and praise. According to

Laura Rattray, the novel “was deemed both timely and timeless, politically astute without resorting to polemics and the prose style inspired rapturous praise. Reviewers judged the novel ‘an amazing first book’, ‘exquisite’, ‘extraordinary’, ‘almost unbelievably good’, ‘like profoundly moving music’, with ‘a magnificent hard reality’, from a writer at twenty-four was displaying a talent ‘full blown’ and ‘nearly perfect’” (“Editing” 190). Edith Walton, of the *New York Times Book Review*, compared the discovery of Johnson to that of Emily Dickinson and Emily Brontë and “concluded that it lay ‘within her power to go, like them, very far’” (Rattray, “Editing” 190). *Now in November* went on to win the Pulitzer Prize in May 1935, beating such contenders as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is the Night*.

The flurry of praise showered upon Johnson’s first novel not only highlights her inexperience and youth as a writer but points to reviewer interest in the book’s aesthetic and literary qualities over its critique of capitalism. Indeed, its humanist critique is complex and more subtle than is found in such contemporary proletarian novels as Jack Conroy’s *The Disinherited* (1933), Robert Cantwell’s *The Land of Plenty* (1934), James T. Farrell’s *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan* (1934), Albert Halper’s *The Foundry* (1934), or Clara Weatherwax’s *Marching! Marching!* (1934). The tone of *Now in November* is quite different from the didacticism of proletarian novels of her time. Indeed, after the publication of her first novel, Johnson became increasingly involved in the fight for social justice. She not only worked with unions and reform groups, but she published reportage about those activities. Her second novel *Jordanstown* (1937) revealed that “an overt political voice had found its way into the work,” and it received mixed, if not “bruising” reviews (Rattray, “Editing” 192, 194). While the publication of *Now in November* indicates a young writer’s budding interest in social justice, the subtlety of her critique in the novel not only reveals her commitment to proletarian realism, but also the influence of

nineteenth-century novels of sensibility and sentimentalism. Combining the two genres enables Johnson to portray realistically the struggles of the working class while garnering sympathy for a group from which she herself, as a member of the dominant middle-class, was an outsider.

Johnson's father was a wealthy businessman, and Josephine was the second of four daughters. She grew up on a farm surrounded by relatives and close family friends. The autobiographical *Seven Houses* (1973) indicates a childhood full of gardens, baseball games, pony rides, fireworks, private school, and a large family house. Johnson "portrays herself as a slow, shy child, tolerant of her own dark side, accepting even of an unemotional and distant father whom she and her sisters feared" (Hoffman 269). In college, Johnson specialized in English and took classes in art. After several trips throughout the United States and Europe, she left college without taking a degree and returned home to write, joining her widowed mother and three sisters on a two hundred acre farm called Webster Groves. Johnson had a privileged upbringing and elite education, but she developed an interest in social justice issues. Nancy Hoffman suggests that her mother, who was a Quaker, a pacifist during World War I, and an active member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation may have been a strong influence.

Whether it was her mother's political influence or the 1929 Crash that caused Johnson to pay attention to the plight of the working-class, she made them the subject of her first and most highly-acclaimed novel. While such authors as Grace Lumpkin found that sentimental proletarianism allowed her to express "a distinctly female voice" within the male-dominated Marxist literary movement, Johnson appears to have a less overtly Marxist agenda. In many ways, however, this appearance is misleading. As a member of the middle class, Johnson straddles two worlds and seeks to garner sympathy for the working-class, critiquing the system from which she herself has derived great privilege. As a college-educated writer who would have

studied the classics of British Literature and someone with little actual experience outside of her class, Johnson combines proletarian critique with British and American traditions of sensibility and sentimentalism. Such classics usually examine the social problems of the upper class as well as the struggle for upward mobility. Working with post-1929 disillusionment and the failure of the American Dream as well as increasing criticisms of rigid gender roles, Johnson transposes familiar literary plot conventions to a working-class setting. Thus, Johnson appropriates the voices and experiences of farm laborers and convincingly melds them into a sentimental novel.

Now in November has been described within the tradition of the pastoral novel, as feminist scholars have paid attention to the intertwining of “women/nature/culture” within its pages (Hoffman 238). However, the sisters in *Now in November* also draw comparisons to novels of sensibility such as Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* in which

[u]nspoken rules and social mores shape these young female lives: these young women long for freedom to leave home, but they are forbidden to venture into the world alone; they long for sexual experience, for intimacy, but they can do nothing but *be* attractive, useful, and available; they are on the verge of intellectual maturity, but have only books and abstractions, not the dilemmas of the public world with which to grapple. Furthermore, they know that decisions about religion and personal philosophy belong to the men of the family, and no matter what independent ideas they develop, these will be tempered in marriage. (243)

While these parallels are true in many significant ways, the sisters Johnson creates in *Now in November* are not the drawing-room decorations of the nineteenth-century, women whose entire fate is determined by their success or failure on the marriage market. Kerrin, Marget, and Merle are limited by their female-ness in similar ways: they do not feel free to venture into the world alone, they lack sexual experience and are expected to be available, and they have only books for access to the outside world. But the fates of these women are not determined by the marriage market so much as the capitalist market. Johnson takes Elizabeth Bennett out of the drawing

room and puts her on the working-class American farm.

Sentimentalism, as I have previously argued, operates by using familiar conventions in order to convey meaning to its readers. By incorporating the mode of novels of sensibility, even the gothic romance with Kerrin's increasing and fitful madness, with her proletarian critique of capitalist failures, Johnson not only finds a way to access the emotional struggles of the working class for herself but also to convey sympathy upon the working-class for her readers, avoiding the didactic preaching of so many proletarian texts.

CHAPTER 4

“His home is not the land”: Caretaking, Domesticity, and Gender in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*

*. . . they settled into a new technique of living; the highway became their home
and movement their medium of expression.*
—Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (162)

*In the evening a strange thing happened: the twenty families became one family,
the children were the children of all. The loss of home became one loss,
and the golden time in the West was one dream.*
—Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (193)

John Steinbeck is arguably the best-known proletarian author of the twentieth century. The 1962 Nobel Laureate’s novels about the Depression era have remained a cultural touchstone for generations of readers, and the current economic downturn has renewed interest in his work among the general public. Television news pundits make frequent references to *The Grapes of Wrath*, his 1939 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, when they discuss the current housing crisis and the families who suffer foreclosure, while a farm policy group argues that the ongoing Texas drought could herald the next Dust Bowl and headlines their materials with the question: “The Grapes of Wrath... Part II?” In 2009 Chris McGreal, writing for the UK’s *The Guardian* newspaper, chronicled his journey across the United States recreating “John Steinbeck’s famous fictional journey to reveal life in the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression” as part of a series titled “*The Grapes of Wrath* Revisited: A Modern-Day Road Trip Through John Steinbeck’s Fiction to Barack Obama’s Reality.” In 2011, BBC reporter Paul Mason also chose to recreate the Joad’s journey for his article titled “In Steinbeck’s Footsteps: America’s Middle-

Class Underclass.” Editorialists frequently use comparisons to and quotations from *The Grapes of Wrath* when assessing corporate greed and labor exploitation, such as when taking Amazon to task for terrible work conditions in their warehouses (Klein) or covering the Occupy Wall Street protests that are spreading across the nation (Osborne). Revivals of the stage adaptation of the novel are scheduled in California, Colorado, Ohio, Michigan, New Jersey, and New York within the next three months, and Ellen Gibson reports in *Business Week* that Netflix rentals of the film adaptation have been on the rise since 2008.

It is worth noting in the midst of these correlations between today’s economic crisis and the Depression era struggles that prompted Steinbeck and authors like him to write dark, angry, and moving portrayals of a broken social system, the vast majority of comparisons are to *The Grapes of Wrath* instead of Steinbeck’s other novels. This isn’t the only book he wrote about the Depression. Indeed, while the stage adaptation for *Of Mice and Men* (1937) has enjoyed a revival in recent years, Steinbeck also wrote *Tortilla Flat* (1935), *In Dubious Battle* (1936), and *Cannery Row* (1945) about strikes, joblessness, economic struggle, and working-class misery. Yet none of these novels has entered the popular lexicon or captured the American imagination in defining representations of the working-class to the degree of *The Grapes of Wrath*. One reason for the dominance of this particular novel, I would argue, is its departure from the militant Marxism on display in “typical” proletarian texts like *In Dubious Battle*. Instead, Steinbeck’s humanist philosophy emerges as he adapts portrayals of the working-class with sentimentalism. Signaling an interest in the domestic with his rendering of male caregiving and domestic longing in *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck effectively combines a stark proletarian critique of a wholesale, nationwide socioeconomic system with this domestic yearning in *The Grapes of Wrath*. By transforming the unforgiving American landscape into the intimate and familiar home-scape,

Steinbeck strikes a chord with his readers, engendering sympathy for the struggles of an “Othered” working-class whose families reflect our own. By drawing the Joads as an “Everyfamily,” Steinbeck crosses class boundaries to create sympathy for the working-class and promotes a humanist argument for collective caretaking and survival. He is also able to push at the traditional definitions of the spaces—originally defined by sentimentalism—in which caregiving occurs as well as who is responsible for that care.

Beyond Ma Joad: Redefining Caretaking and Its Spaces

Earlier critiques of gender and domesticity in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) have tended to focus on John Steinbeck’s incorporation of Robert Briffault’s theories of matriarchal family structures or to critique Steinbeck’s portrayal of Ma Joad’s power as one-dimensional and limited to the private realm of maternal care and domestic duty. Thus far, assessments of gender in *The Grapes of Wrath* have maintained traditional separations between public/private spaces and gendered relationships to them, treating such spaces in the text as intact categories intensified by the economic circumstances of the 1930s. However, much of *The Grapes of Wrath* complicates such a dichotomy by collapsing traditional separations of public/private space. It also alters gendered relationships to those spaces, revising the concept of the domestic sphere. Though Steinbeck builds upon traditional patriarchal and matriarchal models, *The Grapes of Wrath* breaks down the walls of the domestic sphere by linking the daily work of the private and public, creating multiple gendered domesticities, and showing that human caretaking—the necessary force for survival in an age when patriarchal, capitalist individualism has failed—crosses gendered boundaries.

Steinbeck does not appear to be trying to rewrite gender roles or shift power along the

binary to privilege women over men and create a matriarchal utopia. After all, at the close of the novel, Tom remains a heroic figure of masculine independence, leadership, and self-sacrifice. Rose of Sharon is portrayed as the inheritor of Ma Joad's matriarchal wisdom and power, able to give restorative life to an ill man, whose "lips came together" as she "smiled mysteriously" with the hint of sexual promise (455). Yet Steinbeck complicates a depiction of Rose of Sharon as a coming-of-age matriarch whose powers are located in traditional feminine and maternal roles: she gives birth to a still-born baby, and her "mysterious" smile holds as much threat as it does allure. Steinbeck is writing beyond conventional forms of masculinity/femininity and the spaces that have traditionally defined them. As Richard Astro, Warren Motley, and Nellie McKay have pointed out, in writing *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck was influenced by anthropologist Robert Briffault's theories on the matriarchal origins of society, the sometimes devastating effects of patriarchal individualism, and the potentially restorative effects of matriarchal collectivism and communal care.²¹ Motley has examined Ma Joad's role as a matriarchal leader and "goddess" figure associated with the rhythms of nature (405)—a woman who promotes a new order of humanism and collective concern. Nellie McKay, however, critiques the association between women's supposed "natural" domesticity and the ways in which such views limit women's social agency to the roles of "happy-wife-and-motherdom," observing that Steinbeck's expansion of Ma Joad's social power does not "extend to an awareness of women's lives and identities beyond the domestic sphere, other than that which has a direct relationship on the survival of the family" ("Happy Wife" 66).

Steinbeck indeed dramatizes the centrality and power of Ma Joad's caretaking role.

²¹ See Richard Astro's *John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist* (1973), Robert Briffault's *The Mothers: A Study of the Origins of Sentiments and Institutions* (1927), Nellie McKay's "'Happy[?]-Wife-and-Motherdom': The Portrayal of Ma Joad in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*" (1990) and Warren Motley's "From Patriarchy to Matriarchy: Ma Joad's Role in *The Grapes of Wrath*" (1982).

However, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, multiple characters engage in multiple forms of caretaking, redefining definitions of caretaking and redefining the spaces in which that caretaking occurs. Steinbeck's expansion of Ma Joad's power, of caretaking, and of the domestic thus extends beyond re-visioning society as a matriarchal culture or limiting women's power to mothering roles. Similarly, as Steinbeck expands the domestic sphere, he also extends the boundaries of "family" to individuals with whom the Joads interact and assist (when they can often least afford to) but who are not actually related to them. Thus, the actions of the Joad family and the education and expansion of caretaking become a microcosm for the kind of social caretaking that Steinbeck envisions as necessary for human survival in a capitalist society which has previously (and harmfully) emphasized individual greed and self-advancement.

I would argue that Steinbeck's consideration of pre-capitalist matriarchal forms of power led him to consider the interconnectedness of the domestic and the public realms as well as the power dynamics inscribed in gender. Thus, while Steinbeck may not have been a proto-feminist able to envision women's power beyond forms of caretaking, he seems to be working against the limitations inherent in gender binaries and considering the ways in which caretaking and the domestic sphere may be expanded beyond the feminine and private and into the realm of the public, patriarchal world. In this way, Steinbeck questions what it means to be a man when traditional, patriarchal methods of defining manhood are unavailable. Similarly, he broadens definitions of womanhood and matriarchy by extending forms of caretaking beyond the confines of the family and domestic ritual. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck establishes the importance of domestic space in the lives of both men and women, supporting his overarching theme of human connection as being necessary for collective survival.

From the Home to the Open Road: Expanding the Sentimental Domestic Tradition

For a text so focused on a critique of capitalism and its devastating effects on those most vulnerable to market forces, much of the novel's action takes place in private, domestic spaces. Through their migration west, the Joads recreate a home site in every place that they stop, literally moving the domestic scene across the landscape of the country. Their efforts enmesh the domestic with their search for work and economic security. To emphasize the difficulty of finding employment, only two scenes of the Joads at work occur in the text. Steinbeck instead offers detailed portrayals of the daily domestic work of packing, setting up, cleaning, cooking, and maintaining campsites, as well as preserving the family's meager resources. By connecting the Joads' domestic world with their public world, Steinbeck—much like women proletarian writers Meridel Le Sueur, Tillie Lerner Olsen, and Grace Lumpkin, to name a few²²—reveals the often hidden domestic labor that burdens working class women. However, by transforming Ma Joad's position within the family hierarchy, Steinbeck places more value on domestic work, the domestic space in which the work occurs, and the women who engage in that work.

Motley argues that in placing this value on domestic work, Steinbeck “follows Briffault's argument that economically productive labor is a woman's source of power” (406). Motley and Briffault identify women's social power as that generated by their “productive” domestic labor. This analysis of power and domestic labor, however, requires further examination because of the gendered classification of that social power and the socially proscribed sites of work. As McKay points out, the traditionally “powerful” nurturing roles of wife and mother prohibit women from access to masculine forms of power by limiting them to caretaking positions that serve and support the men who engage in public labor outside the home.

²² See Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl* (1930s) and *Salute to Spring* (1940), Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread* (1932), and Tillie Lerner Olsen's *Yonnonndio: From the Thirties* (1974).

Steinbeck's text, with its roots in both sentimentalism and literary realism, reveals a struggle to navigate the idealized humanism promoted by Briffault's matriarchal theories and the ensuing alteration of gender roles and gendered forms of power. With the expansion of domestic space, Steinbeck must account for the shift in relationships that represent and influence individual identity, gender identity, and community identity. Because of traditional associations among masculinity, labor, and the land, Steinbeck's extension of domestic space (in the context of 1930s social upheaval) complicates his characters' readings of their own identities. As the novel progresses, the Joads are forced to challenge traditional gender roles in order to maintain the family in the midst of economic hardships.

Although *The Grapes of Wrath* is not a domestic novel in a traditional sense,²³ its focus on the home and on Ma Joad's ability to maintain her family both materially and emotionally may be read in view of the political and social aims of that genre. Nancy Armstrong argues that authors of earlier domestic fiction sought to represent human value in terms outside of available politicized literary discourse and thus represented "an individual's value in terms of his, but more often in terms of *her*, essential qualities of mind" ("Introduction" 622; italics in the original). Domestic fiction, according to Armstrong, "seized the authority to say what was female . . . in order to contest the reigning notion of kinship relations that attached most power and privilege to certain family lines" (623). Such novels as Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*

²³ Nancy Armstrong argues in *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987) that texts including 18th century conduct books and novels about women's home life, social customs, romantic entanglements, and marital arrangements created new forms of social power. She contends that writers ranging from Samuel Richardson to the Brontës, Jane Austen, and Virginia Woolf focused on new forms of female identity as a central component to an emerging middle class based on economic status, social behavior, and moral quality. Nina Baym extends this examination to women's writing in nineteenth century American literature in *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and About Women in America, 1820-70* (1993), where she shows that women's writing developed from the domestic tradition and was inaugurated by Catharine Sedgwick's *A New-England Tale* (1822). These texts continued to draw on the nineteenth century American culture of sentiment and relied on the inherent goodness of human nature and the power of feelings as a guide to right conduct for the vulnerable female protagonist as well as for the reader.

(1847), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847-48) brought order to social relationships by subordinating all social differences "to those based on gender." By representing such psychological motives as emotional connection, individual desire, and moral value, they countered prevailing social hierarchies and "exalted the domestic woman over and above her aristocratic counterpart . . . the female was the figure . . . on whom depended the outcome of the struggle among competing ideologies."

The domestic novel's impact should not be underestimated, for as it progressed it "helped to formulate the ordered space we now recognize as the household, made that space totally functional, and used it as the context for representing normal behavior" (637). Further, nineteenth-century sentimental fiction in the United States to which *The Grapes of Wrath* has already been linked draws from this tradition. In his essay "*The Grapes of Wrath*: In the Light of Modern Critical Theory," B. R. McElderry, Jr. is untroubled by sentimentality in the novel, writing that it "is vigorously sympathetic to the 'open' society" and that it "skillfully communicates attitudes of a relatively inarticulate group or type . . . Sentimentality may impair, but does not cancel, its value" (313). Numerous critics have alternately praised and panned sentimentality in the text, but the exchange grew a bit more involved with the traditions of sentimental literature after Leslie Fiedler denounced *The Grapes of Wrath* as "maudlin, sentimental, and overblown" ("Looking Back" 55). John Seelye defends the novel against Fiedler's charges by comparing *The Grapes of Wrath* to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, declaring Steinbeck's novel "the greatest sentimental novel of protest of the twentieth century" (13).

Jane Tompkins, Shirley Samuels, and Nina Baym argue that, like domestic fiction, sentimental fiction uses gendered discourse to enact new political and cultural ideologies, and Ann Romines examines the significance of the "domestic ritual" of housework in such novels.

Whereas nineteenth-century literature by men gave domestic work “almost no serious consideration,” Romines argues that women writers used portrayals of sentimental heroines who engage in the habits of housework, termed “domestic ritual,” to push “back confusion daily, to create her own domestic sphere” and to participate “in an enterprise connected with the continuity of a common culture and the triumph of human values over natural process” (10, 13). Similarly, women writers of the 1930s frequently used domestic ritual or focused on domestic scenes and female protagonists in their social protest writing. The presentation of domestic life allowed these writers to show working class women’s connection with common (i.e., middle class) culture and to emphasize working class female struggles for survival against the chaos of the capitalist system. In developing shared domestic sympathies, and by contrasting the daily work of the domestic with the ideology of “home,” woman proletarian writers could argue for “the triumph of human values over natural process” or reveal the human tragedy created by a capitalist system that thwarts triumph at every turn. Tillie Lerner Olsen and Josephine Johnson are two such authors who focus simultaneously on class and gender concerns, undermining classic capitalist mythologies through the individualized experiences of female protagonists.

In her unfinished novel *Yonnonidio: From the Thirties*, Olsen not only reveals “poverty’s arithmetic” and the Holbrook family’s desperate attempts to survive on Jim’s intermittent, meager salary, but she also carefully parallels work done in the home with work done in the farm and factory (23). In one memorable scene, Anna Holbrook cans peaches in the kitchen and worries over her children’s heat-stroke symptoms when the narration cuts to the slaughterhouse where conditions are hellish and a boiler explodes, scalding workers—particularly women: “the main steam pipe breaks open Peg and Andra and Philomena and Cleola directly underneath fall and writhe in their crinkling skins, their sudden juices” (181). The description of the accident

not only evokes the appalling conditions of the slaughterhouse, but the “crinkling skins” and “sudden juices” also reference the peaches Anna is canning, imparting weight, danger, and a heightened sense of desperation to her labor. Johnson’s novel, *Now in November*, is set on a mortgaged Midwestern farm, where the entire Haldmarne family must work together for survival. The family’s three daughters share in the constant toil of both farm and home, and each female pays a high personal price for the failure of traditional patriarchal protections—without ownership of the land, without financial security, without marriage, there is no safety for them or for the family itself. The mother is fatally burned fighting a field fire, the oldest daughter goes mad and commits suicide, and the two youngest daughters shoulder the burdens of the entire family: “I saw Father with awful clearness as he would be soon. Old and querulous and able only to shell beans in the sun. And I saw how the debt would be Merle’s and mine to carry by ourselves—how many years I do not know, but for a long and uncounted time” (230).

While woman proletarian writers have represented women’s “hidden” domestic work to analyze the influence of public space on private home life, to equate women’s work with industrial or agricultural work, or to break down capitalist mythologies, Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* draws from multiple domestic and sentimental traditions, reinvesting domesticity with symbolic matriarchal power and the ability to reinforce human connection. Thus, in the social and political upheaval of the 1930s, Steinbeck draws again upon the female figure and the domestic realm to redefine human value and enact the working class struggle. To draw his characters realistically and argue for their humanity, Steinbeck essentializes human difference to gender and seeks to define social constructs, thereby working against the dehumanizing forces of capitalist “machines” that perpetuate the “causes” leading to social inequality and unrest (32, 150).

“something more than men”: The Constant Value of Domesticity

“And all of them were caught up in something larger than themselves,” Steinbeck writes of the landowners evicting their tenants, though the idea expands to encompass the men and women evicted (31). The owners of the land “take no responsibility for the banks or the companies because they were men and slaves” and “the banks were machines and masters all at the same time” (31, 21). In a world where men and masculinity are defined by their labor and land ownership, to take both away is to thrust men into more than just economic crisis—it is to remove the signifiers of masculinity, the most basic premise of their identities. “Grampa took up the land, and he had to kill the Indians and drive them away,” the men protest: “Pa was born here, and he killed weeds and snakes . . . it’s our land. We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it’s no good, it’s still ours. That’s what makes it ours—being born on it, working it, dying on it” (33).

All men are subject to the overwhelming forces of the capitalist bank, and yet, “the bank is something more than men.” For Steinbeck, when masculinity falters, femininity remains steady, necessary for everyone’s survival. In the aftermath of the owners’ visit, in the midst of male confusion, the women know intuitively that confusion can turn to aggression, for “a man so hurt and so perplexed may turn in anger, even on people he loves” (34). The women—practical and forward-thinking—question the men about the future, but receiving no answer, they retreat with the children to the work of the house. While the men have been failed by the market, failed by the public realm, and failed by capitalist forces, the domestic realm is the constant to which Steinbeck returns. There, the women continue with the ongoing work of the household and the ceaseless labor of survival larger than any suffering of the self.

Steinbeck’s turn to the domestic allows him to explore the human consequences of a

broken socioeconomic system, linking *The Grapes of Wrath* to traditions in women's writing that reveal ideologies embedded in representations of the life of the home. Jennifer Haytock, in her examination of modern war and domestic novels, observes that such texts offer insight far beyond their surface concerns: "Domestic writing is more than a private record of an individual woman's life in her home; it is the representation of the power dynamics and social inscriptions that structure the life of the home, for women and for men" (xiii). For Steinbeck, too, the revolutionary power of the domestic sphere is symbolic of essential human value and social progressivism. However, while Steinbeck achieves his humanist presentation by converting public space to domestic space and transforming traditional gender roles, he fails to break the limitations of gendered divisions of power and the discourse of domestic ideals.

The Grapes of Wrath's opening scenes conflate natural, agricultural, and domestic elements, cutting across the ideological and physical barriers that define them as separate. The crop-killing dust that "settled on the corn, piled up on the tops of fence posts, piled up on the wires . . . blanketed the weeds and trees" draws attention to the natural world and its associations with agricultural production and public labor (3). But this dust also invades homes where men and women "huddled," though houses "were shut tight, and cloth wedged around doors and windows . . . it settled like pollen on the chairs and tables, on the dishes. The people brushed it from their shoulders." The apocalyptic dust chokes the crops outside and menaces the people who have sought shelter together in houses, showing that everyone takes refuge in the home—regardless of gender—but that this space is vulnerable to the same forces that threaten to destroy both their land and their economic security. Thus, Steinbeck's all-pervading dust hints at the fragility of social, ideological, and gendered barriers that define these spaces as separate and unconnected. The first chapter's final scenes depict a return to gendered divisions of labor,

family role, and emotional (dis)connection as Steinbeck reinforces his critique of the instability of social ideologies that define men and women through separated public and private spaces.

In these early pages, men, women, and children occupy specific spaces; they observe each other to determine appropriate reactions to tragedy. Men “stood by their fences and looked at the ruined corn,” women “came out of the houses to stand beside their men” and looked at the men’s faces, while children “stood near by, drawing figures in the dust with bare toes,” sending out “exploring senses to see whether men and women would break.” Steinbeck concludes the opening chapter by placing these anonymous figures in separated, gendered spaces: “The women went into the houses to their work, and the children began to play . . . The men sat in the doorways of their houses; their hands were busy with sticks and little rocks. The men sat still—thinking—figuring” (4). This placement prefigures the scene in Chapter Five in which men, women, and children react to the news that the owners will evict them from their land. The women return to the home, the children return to play in the yard, and the men return to “squatting in the dust” (35). However, Steinbeck prepares the reader for a new understanding of domestic space through the Joads’ journey to follow with his placement of these symbolic figures. The first chapter’s closing image of the men sitting in the doorways of their homes fidgeting with “sticks and little rocks” gestures at their transitional status (4). The literal movement of the men from agricultural and natural space toward domestic space hints at the failure of traditional patriarchal protections and at the refuge offered by both matriarchal nurturing and the constant value of domestic space.

It is the home space that Tom Joad seeks at the beginning of the novel when he is released from prison, meets up with Reverend Jim Casy, and heads toward the former Joad homestead. Though many readers focus on the Christ-like, self-sacrificial journeys of these two

men, it is important to observe the spaces that Steinbeck creates around them. Tom has just been released from McAlester correctional facility, which he describes as a de facto home and domestic space where “[y]ou eat regular, an’ get clean clothes, and there’s places to take a bath” (26). Although the all-male facility does not meet the sexual needs of the incarcerated men—prompting Tom’s wry remark that it “[m]akes it hard not havin’ no women”—the domestic certainties of McAlester are so appealing that Tom tells of a man who deliberately violates parole in order to be returned to prison: “[s]ays he come back where they got a few conveniences an’ he eats regular. He says it makes him feel lonesome out there in the open havin’ to think what to do next. So he stole a car an’ come back.”

Tom, however, believes he has a home and family to which he can go, and thus, upon his parole, immediately travels to find it. But because this home has been displaced, Tom’s journey becomes a quest for home. Not only does he share the expansion of domestic space that occurs as his family establishes temporary homes throughout their migratory travels, but he also seeks to recover the economic and emotional security of the domestic ideal. Tom’s dream changes from the Joads’ empty “unpainted house . . . mashed at one corner . . . pushed off its foundations so that it slumped at an angle, its blind front windows pointing at a spot of sky well above the horizon” to the one he shares with Ma Joad of “one a them white houses with orange trees all aroun’” (40, 99).

Similarly, Rev. Casey’s journey is grounded in and influenced by the domestic. His first appearance in the novel as a wanderer sitting “on the ground, leaning against the trunk of the tree” connects him to nature and to the agricultural space that fails to provide men with work or security (18). Casey not only accompanies Tom to the abandoned Joad homestead and the temporary home the family occupies, but he asks the family members if he can join them on their

venture to California. In so doing, Casy doesn't just ask if he can tag along or share the Joads' food supplies but requests a position within the family structure itself: "He knew the government of families, and he knew he had been taken into the family. Indeed his position was eminent, for Uncle John moved sideways, leaving space between Pa and himself for the preacher. Casy squatted down like the others, facing Grampa enthroned on the running board" (103). Thus, not only is room physically made for Casy in the masculine space of the family but, like Tom's journey, his becomes the expanded domestic journey of the entire Joad family.

Steinbeck emphasizes that Casy's developing revolutionary consciousness is awakened in two primary domestic spaces: the Hooverville camp and the jailhouse. Casy first kicks a deputy to prevent his attacking migrants in a Hooverville camp and then sacrifices himself to save Tom and his family from persecution: "Casy said softly, 'If you mess in this your whole fambly, all your folks, gonna get in trouble . . . your ma and your pa, they'll get in trouble. Maybe they'll send Tom back to McAlester'" (266). When Tom is later reunited with Casy and discovers his involvement in the peach workers' strike, Casy describes his time in the jailhouse after his arrest as a pivotal moment in which he learns about other men's troubles and begins working on their behalf:

"Jail house is a kinda funny place . . . Here's me, been a-goin' into the wilderness like Jesus to try find out somepin. Almost got her sometimes, too. But it's in the jail house I really got her . . . Great big ol' cell, an' she's full all a time. New guys come in, and guys go out. An' 'course I talked to all of 'em." (381)

It is not alone in the wilderness as a Christ-like, masculine wanderer, but in jail that Casy's revolutionary consciousness wakens and that he finds the human connection he seeks throughout the novel. Despite its obvious negatives, the jailhouse represents a domestic ideal because of its emphasis on daily household concerns: regular beds, regular meals, regular baths, and the uninterrupted care of bodily needs. Because domestic work in a patriarchal system is

traditionally women's work, an all-male domestic site becomes, for Steinbeck, a domestic ideal because the men experience having their needs taken care of without participating in the work behind the caretaking. This situation, then, leaves them with time to talk, develop, and connect. Both Tom and Jim experience this all-male domestic space as an opportunity for creating human bonds; unlike the house yards where anonymous men think alone and figure silently, the men in these all-male domestic sites have time and space to talk to each other and establish relationships that lead to unity and action.

Not Just for Men: Domesticity and Power

Steinbeck, however, is not just concerned with creating a new domestic ideal or inventing a masculine domestic realm. While the jailhouse presents an alternative location for idealized male connection, Steinbeck also acknowledges the domestic as a potentially revolutionary space reserved for, and run by, women. Furthermore, he presents the domestic as the universal experience connecting all human beings through the ceaseless work required to meet basic requirements for shelter and food, the need to maintain family units for survival, and the emotional connection developed through the domestic's emphasis on meeting the needs of others. Because their land and jobs have been lost, men who would leave the domestic now stay in it, re-locating the center of the novel's action to this site. Men, who would leave their families and their houses to work fields, sell crops, move livestock, or perform other work, now either sit in yards or help their families pack meager possessions and set up camps as they migrate across the American landscape. The male Joads even sell the tools of their labor—horses, wagon, and farming implements—while such domestic items as pans, dishes, and utensils are carefully saved for the trip ahead. Steinbeck, thus, not only transfers power to the domestic sphere as the

sustaining force for the Joad family but also uses migration to compel the relocation of home sites across the entire country, transforming the landscape from one of agricultural and industrial opportunity to a series of domestic scenes. Focusing on the Joads' domestic life enables Steinbeck to draw them as a microcosm of the working-class family, subject to a machine of dehumanizing socioeconomic forces but urgent and relevant to a reader who sympathizes with their basic human plight.

As Motley rightly points out, Steinbeck's portrayal of Ma Joad and her domestic work differs from "classical accounts of the pioneer wife" and "does not take the diurnal chores and unending childbearing as signs of [her] oppression" (406). However, while Motley reads these signs as Steinbeck's embrace of Briffault's argument that economically productive labor is a woman's source of power, Steinbeck's use of this labor must also be read in light of the female sentimental domestic tradition in its various forms. What is new about Steinbeck's use of the domestic is not that he ascribes female power and idealizes feminine strength within this particular—and as McKay notes, limited—realm. Instead, it is Steinbeck's expansion of the domestic sphere and the redefinition of this space through domestic work that is innovative and revealing. Rather than confine women to the home and circumscribe women's power to the confines of caretaking within the walls of the home, Steinbeck has removed the physical and metaphorical walls of the domestic sphere that confines and defines women. Steinbeck pushes at the limitations of domestic power, not only highlighting it as a primary force for human survival but also as a connecting force that allows an individual or a family unit to bond with another. Through the domestic, Steinbeck emphasizes this message of group caretaking—a moral responsibility to care for others and to expand the definition of "family" to include all members of the social group—as a necessary force for modern survival in the face of a failing capitalist

system that emphasizes patriarchal individualism over collective care. Ma Joad's power increases and her influence grows as her world expands through the literal cross-country journey. Not only must the Joads establish temporary homes in multiple—usually un-walled—sites, but they create connections with other families through these domestic spaces.

Ma Joad doubtless is the maternal “goddess” figure Motley and others have praised and criticized as sentimental, matriarchal, and highly feminized. In her first appearance, she cooks breakfast inside Uncle John's kitchen: providing food is one of her primary activities throughout the text. In her study on domestic ritual in women's writing, Ann Romines observes that:

A woman who . . . made effective ritual of her housekeeping was taking on godlike status, as she pushed back confusion daily, to create her own domestic sphere. Establishing an awareness of the ever-lurking threat of chaos, should a housekeeper let down her guard, seems to have been an essential part of a girl's education. (10)

While Steinbeck indeed describes Ma Joad as a “goddess” whose “position as a healer” and “arbiter” made her “remote and faultless in judgment,” his lofty accolade may also reflect the type of chaos-control through domestic ritual that Romines describes (74). However, Ma takes the use of domestic ritual to control chaos a step further by using domestic routine to counter external socioeconomic threats to the survival of the family. With no land, no work, and virtually no money, the Joads' lives have been thrown into confusion, and the establishment of small daily normalities are necessary to keep the family going. Ma literally creates—or directs the creation of—the family camps by routinely laying out bedding for sleeping, boxes for sitting, and dishes for eating at each site, but she also uses the ritual of cooking to control the threat of chaos to her own family. Because this ritual is so ingrained in normal daily activity and so thoroughly ascribed to Ma as her responsibility, no one recognizes that this ritual becomes a method of controlling chaos or asserting authority. Yet, even as Ma Joad automatically cooks for her family—and they automatically expect her to—she is also able to use the practice of feeding

them to calm or comfort them or to exercise control by using food preparation or the need to eat to influence family decisions.

In this way, disordered, threatening events are contrasted by the seemingly mundane routine of preparing and eating a meal, balancing confusion with the domestic stability Ma Joad alone provides. She monitors resources and the consumption of food as a measure of their health, emotional well-being, and ability to survive. Ma both capitalizes on expected economic windfalls and uses food to urge hopefulness that they will find jobs and security: she cooks pork and greens before they slaughter the pigs and depart for the west, she splurges on neck meat for stew on their arrival at Hooverville, and she cooks hamburger, fried potatoes, and coffee on the first night picking peaches. After Al, John, and Pa grow discouraged from the lack of work opportunities at Weedpatch Camp, she encourages faith: “Ma pulled herself together. ‘John, you go find Pa. Get to the store. I want beans an’ sugar an’-a piece of fryin’ meat an’ carrots an’-tell Pa to get somepin nice-anything-but nice-for tonight. Tonight-we’ll have-somepin nice’” (324).

The domestic stability Ma Joad offers increasingly contrasts the instabilities of the outside world. A microcosm of the soothing that food provides is the Hooverville episode in which Ma cooks a stew that attracts a group of hungry children from the camp. In this highly sentimental event, Ma is unable to refuse the children’s needs, rationing a small portion of the family’s meal to them: “I can’t he’p it. Can’t keep it from you” (258). Thus, Steinbeck extends the definition of family to include all of these stray children through Ma’s empathetic domestic caretaking. Even as Ma makes difficult decisions that impact her family’s resources, her authority in this realm provides her with the opportunity to influence decisions beyond the domestic sphere. Her influence extends past matters of the home and household to any decision which affects the family at large. Ma, at times, urges the family to pause the journey and find a

place to stop and prepare a meal: “Maybe we better fin’ a place to stop ‘fore sunset,’ she said. ‘I got to get some pork a-boilin’ an’ some bread made. That takes time’”(133). However, while Ma begins by influencing the pace of the trip, she eventually begins to control the direction and movement of the entire family. Though safe at Weedpatch Camp, Ma worries about the men’s unemployment and subsequent inability to buy quality food. She insists the family leave to find work:

“Now you figger,” Ma said. “I ain't watchin' this here fambly starve no more. One day’ more grease. That's what we got . . .”
“This here hot water an’ toilets—” Pa began.
“Well, we can't eat no toilets . . . We’re a-goin’ to Marysville. I don’ care what the pay is. We’re a-goin.” (355)

Similarly, Ma refuses to allow Tom to leave the family after Casy’s death:

“Listen to me,” she said. “I’m gettin' cornmeal today. We’re a-gonna eat cornmeal mush. An’ soon’s we get enough for gas, we’re movin’ away. This ain’t a good place. An’ I ain’t gonna have Tom out alone. No, sir.” (391)

However, while many of Ma Joad’s assertions of authority occur in domestic scenes or directly relate to household concerns, Ma does not appear to be a figure whose power is entirely located within and limited by the domestic sphere. Steinbeck’s expansion of the domestic sphere itself does not appear to be a limitation on the world of the Joads so much as an acknowledgment of the interconnectedness of the public and private realms that patriarchal ideologies have tended to view as separate. While Ma initially draws much of her authority from the domestic and her matriarchal stature, Steinbeck’s expansion of the domestic sphere for all of his characters and the relocation of gendered spaces creates tension in his presentation of gender identity and power. When traditional forms of masculinity fail, when men are failed by the bank, the master, and the machine, Steinbeck seems to ask, how do men and women negotiate the space to be human?

*Transitional Figures, Domestic Spaces, Collective Survival:
Redefining Masculinity and Caretaking*

Steinbeck's spatial representations are key to understanding the tensions his novel creates. Even as he expands the domestic sphere to encompass the American landscape, he is cognizant of the meanings inherent in other spaces occupied by his characters. Just as anonymous men, women, and children move through yards, doorways, and houses to represent both their traditional roles and their uncertain new relationships, the Joads begin the narrative in traditional relationships that are altered as family authority shifts and gender identities are newly complicated.

Uncle John's yard serves as a masculine, public space. When Tom Joad and Rev. Casy first enter this space and meet Pa, Steinbeck maintains the house/yard dichotomy and establishes the yard and the truck as both masculine and public. It is significant that Tom finds Pa Joad working on the truck, hammering rails on its sides; the scene reinforces the associations among yard, vehicle, work, male identity, and patriarchal authority. Ma is inside cooking, and the men are able to play a brief joke on her because of her position in the house. She literally can't see Tom's face as he stands in the doorway: "[s]he looked out the door, but the sun was behind Tom, and she saw only a dark figure outlined by the bright yellow sunlight" (73-74). Once again, Steinbeck's spatial placement symbolizes the gendered power structure of the family—Pa is the patriarch working outside, Ma is the matriarch working in the home, and Tom stands in the doorway as a transitional figure. Steinbeck initially follows traditional spatial designations by assigning the public yard as masculine and the private domestic as feminine; those who occupy those spaces perform the traditional gender roles associated with them. However, as Steinbeck moves the Joads away from the yard, expands the domestic sphere, and complicates the spatial representation of the truck, the gender roles of those who occupy those spaces change.

In the absence of work or land to define masculinity and in the face of an expanding domestic sphere, Steinbeck relocates masculine space to the truck. As Tom and Al are unable to find jobs, they instead help the family by driving and maintaining the truck. The young men feel responsible for this part of the family's survival: the truck and their ability to keep it running is a symbol of their masculine identity and authority:

this was [Al's] responsibility, this truck, its running, and its maintenance. If something went wrong it would be his fault, and while no one would say it, everyone, and Al most of all, would know it was his fault. And so he felt it, watched it, and listened to it. And his face was serious and responsible. And everyone respected him and his responsibility. Even Pa, who was the leader, would hold a wrench and take orders from Al. (96-97)

The truck allows Tom and Al a way to define their masculinity through their knowledge of and their responsibility for the machine. Tom, who learned to drive and repair cars while in prison, initially dismisses his younger brother as a "squirt" but begins to accept him when Pa assures him that Al "worked for a company. Drove truck last year. He knows quite a little He can tinker an engine, Al can" (82). Al, meanwhile, idolizes Tom for his experience and prison reputation—"his brother had killed a man, and no one would ever forget it"—and feels his failures even more deeply in contrast to his brother's masculinity.²⁴

Steinbeck also uses the car space as an opportunity for connection, particularly among men. Scenes of car repair often parallel domestic scenes or create supplementary masculine spaces within the domestic camp sites. For example, the Joads first meet the Wilsons in a domestic setting because they stop to camp in the same site, but Al's offer to repair the Wilsons' car connects the two families. Al is also able to extend a masculine form of hospitality to repay the Wilsons' domestic hospitality during Grandpa Joad's illness: "Al said, 'I'll fix your car—me

²⁴ When a con-rod bearing blows in the Wilsons' car, Al "felt his failure" (166). While he is glad that Tom has the knowledge to fix the car, his perceived failure makes him angry and defensive: "Al's face went red with anger. He throttled down his motor. 'Goddamn it,' he yelled, 'I didn't burn that bearin' out! What d'ya mean, I'll bust a spring too?'" The implication, Al knows and defends himself against, is that a failure to maintain the car is a failure of his masculine ability to provide for the family.

an' Tom will.' And Al looked proud that he could return the family's obligation" (139). The Wilsons' car troubles offer Tom and Al the opportunity to be masculine providers, suggesting that the two families travel together:

Tom and Al went silent, each waiting for the other. "You tell 'em," Al said finally. "... maybe it ain't the same thing Al's thinking. Here she is, anyways. We got a overload, but Mr. and Mis' Wilson ain't. If some of us folks could ride with them an' take some a their light stuff in the truck, we wouldn't break no springs an' we could git up hills. An' me an' Al both knows about a car, so we could keep that car a-rollin'. We'd keep together on the road an' it'd be good for ever'body." (148)

Significantly, Tom and Al treat each other as equals, with equal claim to the idea and equal control—drivership and responsibility for a vehicle. They offer a shared responsibility for the welfare of both families, acknowledging that their best chance for survival is to combine resources. Similarly, in Hooverville Tom and Al become acquainted with Floyd Knowles while he repairs his old Buick. Knowles tells them about the dangers of California and first suggests the need for workers to organize.²⁵ Thus, like the jailhouse experience that educates Casy, the masculine space of the car offers men a place to talk and connect.

Yet even as Steinbeck creates the truck as a space in which men can define their masculinity and create connections, he complicates this masculine space by connecting it with the domestic which serves as the family center. The truck not only carries the family as well as all of their possessions, but it is also at times a makeshift shelter. Given a significant position within the family hierarchy, the truck becomes a meeting site: "The house was dead, and the fields were dead; but this truck was the active thing, the living principle. The ancient Hudson . . . was the new hearth, the living center of the family; half passenger car and half truck, high-sided and clumsy" (99). While Robert DeMott critically stresses Steinbeck's use of the domestic term

²⁵ Tom earns Knowles' respect by grinding a car valve: "You can do her," he said. "Damn good thing. You'll need to" (246). Knowles offers insight into the dire work situation, advising them and providing a tip on possible work because Al helps him repair the car: "Floyd said patiently, "I know ya jus' got here. They's stuff ya got to learn. If you'd let me tell ya, it'd save ya somepin. If ya don' let me tell ya, then ya got to learn the hard way"" (260).

“new hearth” and views the truck as “the site of matriarchal wisdom and the center of domestic relations” (xv), Steinbeck clearly emphasizes the hybrid nature of the vehicle by placing it between a dead house and dead fields. It is a mixture of passenger touring car and work truck, embodying the domestic caretaking of the hearth while also representing the masculine agency of the work truck.

The family’s placement around and in the truck is significant, providing insights into the convergence of the public and domestic spaces as well shifting power dynamics and gender roles. During the family council, Pa, Uncle John, and Grandpa Joad—who form “the nucleus” of the family—squat in a semi-circle facing the truck. The women stand behind the men, and the children stand silently with the women. Al squats with the men for the first time, as “[a]lways he had stood behind with the women before,” signifying his acceptance as a man and his promotion to a man’s level of authority (100).

However, Steinbeck quickly begins to undermine that division, and the family council is twice interrupted by Ma Joad’s return to the stove: “Ma went to the house again . . . the yellow light flashed up in the dark kitchen. When she lifted the lid on the big pot, the smell of boiling side-meat and beet greens came out the door. They waited for her to come back across the darkening yard, for Ma was powerful in the group” (103). Her physical movement between female domestic space and male public space—accepted and causing a pause in the discussion—underscores her stature within the family as well as her transitional status. The tacit acknowledgement of Ma’s power interrogates the family’s physical placement around the truck, revealing that power dynamics within the family are more complex than simple gender divisions. By moving between the family and the house to tend the meal they will eat before leaving, Ma wordlessly emphasizes her importance in the decision-making process.

Ma Joad's pivotal confrontation with Pa about the separation of the family occurs in front of the truck as she wields a jack handle. After the truck breaks down, Tom proposes that the family temporarily splits, leaving Tom and Casy to find parts and make repairs with the intention of catching back up with the rest of the family further along the road. Although Pa supports the plan and assumes the authority as male head of the family to approve this course of action, Ma recognizes the danger of the proposed separation and the likelihood that a temporary split will become permanent separation. She stands at the center of her family group rather than at the edge, in front of the vehicle which symbolizes both domestic and masculine space. In this scene, Ma enacts her idealized matriarchal role by protecting her family's interests but she inverts the behaviors to which women are assigned by threatening violence to the head of her family. She not only stands up to all the men in the family, but she also shames Pa and emasculates him in front of them: "[a]n' I'll shame you, Pa. I won't take no whuppin', cryin' an' a-beggin'. I'll light into you. An' you ain't so sure you can whup me anyways" (169). For Steinbeck, the convergence of the feminine and masculine is necessary for the family's survival, but it carries costs. To increase matriarchal power is to decrease patriarchal authority: to increase Ma Joad's influence is to masculinize her, to decrease Pa's influence is to emasculate him.

By the close of the novel, Ma Joad and Tom replace Pa's patriarchal leadership in the family. He can resist only by withholding approval or threatening violence, a traditional form of control which no longer holds power over Ma. He threatens: "[s]eems like times is changed Time was when a man said what we'd do. Seems like women is tellin' now. Seems like it's purty near time to get out a stick" (352). Yet an unimpressed Ma observes the connection between his inability to work and his diminished authority, underscoring her point as she continues with her labor:

Ma put the clean dripping tin dish out on a box. She smiled down at her work.
“ . . . you ain’t a-doin’ your job, either a-thinkin’ or a-workin’. If you was, why, you could use your stick, an’ women folks’d sniffle their nose an’ creep-mouse aroun’. But you jus’ get you a stick now an’ you ain’t lickin’ no woman; you’re a-fightin’, ‘cause I got a stick all laid out too.” (352)

Pa Joad, significantly, regains some of his lost authority—and his masculinity—in the final pages of the text, in a futile attempt to save both the Joads’ boxcar home and their truck. By organizing a group of men to build a bank against rising floodwaters in the hope of protecting their homes and their cars, Pa emphasizes the need for unified action in the face of overwhelming forces. The men fight to save both the home sites and the cars, reinforcing the balance between domestic and masculine space as necessary for survival. Though the levee is ultimately broken by a tree, Pa’s efforts signify his awakening consciousness and his re-figuration as a transitional character.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the two figures that increase authority in the text are the two figures that successfully transition between domestic space and masculine space. While the roots of their authority are grounded in more traditionally defined gender roles, both Ma Joad and Tom shift between these spaces. Tom’s masculinity is reinforced by his ability to repair and maintain the truck, which is viewed as a form of caretaking. Further, Tom values the home—upon his release from prison and his discovery that “home” is gone, he joins forces with Ma to preserve the family, sharing Ma’s dream of an idealized physical home with white picket fences and orange trees, and supporting the domestic principle that the home is ultimately the family. Thus, Tom’s domestic education teaches him to value humanist ideals that become his impetus for movement toward collective action and self-sacrifice on behalf of the working class.

Steinbeck draws Ma Joad as a domestic authority who moves beyond maternal caretaking to occupy male spaces and take on masculine authority. Yet, Steinbeck also seems to struggle

with the ways in which Ma's expansion of power operates. Though she grows in authority and directly challenges the men of the family for control, her expressions of traditional masculine behavior are brief, and she quickly returns to her nurturing role. After the jack handle confrontation, she "looked in astonishment at the bar of iron" and her hand trembles before she drops it to the ground (170). Similarly, she attributes her shaming of Pa to a caretaking impulse: "if you can take an' make 'im mad, why, he'll be awright" (352). Given the pervasiveness of traditional forms of female caretaking, Steinbeck seems uncertain how to illustrate a sustained extension of women's power. Admittedly, there are times in *The Grapes of Wrath* when feminine power appears potentially threatening. Ma Joad's strength is unassailable; though her position is both "great and humble," she is "the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken" (74). It is through her that the family finds its will to survive, which means that she can choose its fate. Just as simply by refusing to acknowledge her husband's manhood, she can take it away. A similar ambivalence, thus, appears in the final scene of the text where Rose of Sharon's self-actualization and nurturing gesture is left deliberately sensual and vaguely threatening, an ambiguous commentary on whether her inheritance of Ma Joad's power and authority should be viewed positively.

Ultimately, Steinbeck privileges an expansion of the domestic realm because he views it—and its caregiving associations—as a stabilizing and sustaining social force. However, while Steinbeck was led to consider the gendered implications of expanding domestic caregiving and the public/private realm, he seems unable to move beyond those correlations to deeper assessments of femininity and masculinity or to deconstruct associations of "woman's work" and "men's work" even within the domestic realm. As McKay has pointed out, only one scene demonstrating an awareness of the gendered divisions of domestic labor occurs in the text. When

Casy offers to help salt pork prior to the family's departure, Ma Joad doesn't seem to understand why he would offer assistance on this particular task:

She stopped her work then and inspected him oddly, as though he suggested a curious thing . . . "It's women's work," she said finally.
"It's all work," the preacher replied. "They's too much of it to split it up to men's or women's work. You got stuff to do. Leave me salt the meat." (107)

Thus, while Steinbeck is breaking down divisions of gendered space, it seems that he isn't redefining the work that goes on within those spaces—after all, there are no scenes of the male Joads cooking meals, washing dishes, or participating in other “women's work” in the text. Steinbeck instead appears to be trying to adapt forms of female caretaking for men, attempting to redefine masculinity by turning to the stability of what has traditionally defined women: caregiving. Steinbeck's model is not necessarily a new matriarchal order, nor is it a glorification of traditional female domesticity. Instead, Steinbeck is recovering and redefining masculinity because traditional, patriarchal signifiers of manhood have failed to define men in the crisis of capitalist failures. Women, for Steinbeck, become more masculine in the face of this male crisis and because, out of necessity, their authority expands as they become more equal participants in the collective effort to lead and survive.

The Working Man of Feeling: Steinbeck's Model of Appropriation

*No man really knows about other human beings.
The best he can do is to suppose that they are like himself.
—Steinbeck, The Winter of Our Discontent (44)*

John Steinbeck grew up in Salinas, California, a beautiful and fertile part of the state. His father was at various times a businessman, accountant, and manager, and his mother was a former teacher. Although his middle-class family was not wealthy, they were prominent in the social circles of their small town. Both of Steinbeck's parents were heavily involved in

community activities; Mr. Steinbeck was a member of the Masons, and Mrs. Steinbeck was a member of Eastern Star, a spiritually-based fraternal organization that promotes charity, truth and loving kindness. An aspiring writer, Steinbeck began producing stories and poems in high school. He enrolled in Stanford in 1919, signing up for courses in classical and British literature, creative writing, and some sciences. Although writing continued to be an obsession for him, Steinbeck eventually left Stanford without taking a degree and began working various jobs in factories and on company ranches throughout California. He briefly moved to New York City to work in construction and as a newspaper reporter, but returned to California to find more time for writing and leisure. He married Carol Henning in 1930, and they moved into the Steinbeck family's summer cottage in Pacific Grove. She supported them both while he continued writing in addition to helping him edit and shape his early work, including the novel that would eventually become *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Steinbeck's interest in the plight of migrant workers and the working-class developed from his experiences laboring in factories and farms while he supported himself during and after college. He worked closely "with migrants and bindlestiffs . . . Those relationships, coupled with an early sympathy for the weak and defenseless, deepened his empathy for workers, the disenfranchised, the lonely and dislocated, an empathy that is characteristic in his work" (Shillinglaw). Steinbeck's interest in migrant life resulted in his first successful novel, *Tortilla Flat*, and he continued to be drawn to working-class struggle as a subject for his work. He was attracted to the growing influence of proletarianism, but, according to Susan Shillinglaw, he was turned off by the zealotry of the local John Reed Clubs he attended. As evidenced by the criticism of both greedy factory owners and ruthless strike organizers in his most radical strike novel, *In Dubious Battle*, Steinbeck sought to offer a more human perspective on the people at

the heart of the class struggle.

Steinbeck—like many other proletarian authors with middle-class backgrounds and educations—not only worked in temporary factory and agricultural jobs, either to support a writing career or get a sense of the actual “on the ground” experiences of the working-class, but he also wrote non-fiction reportage about working-class conditions. He was commissioned by the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1936 to write articles on migrant farm workers. Steinbeck also accompanied photographer Horace Bristol as he traveled to California labor camps in the winter of 1937 for a proposed picture book for *Life* on dust bowl migrants.

Having already written a powerful strike novel that emphasizes factory labor conditions, the masculine realm of the proletarian worker, and the exploitation and violence of that experience, Steinbeck needed a new way to convey the suffering and struggle he witnessed among migrant families. According to Bristol, it was the photographic journey that gave Steinbeck the idea to write his iconic novel of migrant experience:

Envisioning a photo essay for *Life*, he contacted Steinbeck who agreed to accompany him to the camps. But *Life* turned down the idea because it was “too far away” and “not important enough,” Bristol said. He called *Fortune* and got a positive response, but Steinbeck didn’t like the prospect of working for such “a capitalistic publication.” Steinbeck eventually decided the story was worth much more than a magazine piece; he would write an entire novel. (Muchnic)

Unbeknownst to Bristol, however, Steinbeck had been working on *The Grapes of Wrath* prior to visiting the camps. He left their joint project in May 1938 to complete the final drafts. While traveling together, Bristol and Steinbeck took pictures and spoke with men, women, and children. Bristol “remembers Steinbeck as an extraordinarily sensitive man whose ‘approach was so soft and good that no one could take offense’” (Muchnic). They had no trouble from anyone, and no one was upset at their taking pictures. Many of the images are in makeshift camps and capture intimate moments, such as “Rose of Sharon, 1938” (originally titled “Nursing Mother in

Camp, near Visalia, Tulare County, California, 1938”), which depicts a young woman breastfeeding her infant. According to the J. Paul Getty Museum, which hosted an exhibit of Bristol’s work in 2002-03, Bristol described their reaction to the moment this photograph was taken: “both Steinbeck and I felt it represented a Madonna figure, with the newborn baby at its mother’s swelling breasts, a faint suggestion of proud fatherhood in the background legs and hand.”

Although Bristol’s photographs were never published in the book he envisioned, some of his images were published in articles that supported the authenticity of Steinbeck’s novel. After *The Grapes of Wrath* and its film version had gained popularity, Bristol’s photographs were published in two articles in *Life* magazine. In a June 1939 photo-essay titled “‘The Grapes of Wrath’: John Steinbeck writes a major novel about western migrants,” nine Bristol photos illustrated “truths” described in the book, with excerpts from *The Grapes of Wrath* underneath each photograph as well as a few captions written specifically for the article. Bristol’s images were not only used as reference material while casting and costuming the film version of the novel, but in 1940, one of the articles paired movie stills with Bristol’s photographs to assert the film’s authenticity. As Samantha Baskind observes, both *Life* articles “emphasize that the photographs prove the facts of the book and the movie . . . providing the necessary proof that Steinbeck’s book was an accurate account of migrant life” (42).²⁶

While proletarian women writers sought legitimacy in a literary world dominated by male intellectuals and turned to sentimentalism in order to assert a female voice into the expression of revolutionary ideas, Steinbeck was an established author whose voice of authority was assumed

²⁶ Throughout his career, Bristol continued to link his work from California’s Central Valley with *The Grapes of Wrath*, renaming many of the photographs after the characters in Steinbeck’s novel. After retiring to Ojai, California, in 1976, Bristol reconsidered his early career. He renamed his 1937–38 photographs of migrant camps after characters in the novel and titled the series *The Grapes of Wrath*.

and accepted. Steinbeck, however, needed a way to move beyond the circumscribed domains of masculinity that dictated a form of realism and authenticity that drew its source from action, violence, and the public sphere. As an individual raised by parents who embraced a humanist philosophy, whose own sympathies were developed by his exposure to working-class struggle, Steinbeck needed a way to speak in a broader emotional tenor for the working-class. Likely influenced by the women writers who came before him, Steinbeck not only expanded the boundaries of the domestic novel by including men but changed the space of the domestic. He also expanded the boundaries of proletarian sentimentalism by offering a new model of the working man of feeling. By embodying and giving voice to workers who had previously been defined more by their actions than their feelings, Steinbeck developed sympathy for a new kind of family and a new kind of man. Just as Bristol's photographs captured the intimacy, longing, suffering, and humanity of people who are so often unseen and forgotten, Steinbeck sought to write the family that would suffer in a recognizable manner to every family, no matter to what class they belonged.

CHAPTER 5

“forged in a crucible of suffering”: Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*

When *Jubilee* was first published in 1966, it was hailed as a welcome addition to the Civil War novel genre. Winner of the Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship Award, it was described on its dust jacket as “inevitably being called the Negro *Gone With The Wind*,” a comparison which would today be troubling. It not only invited Margaret Mitchell’s vast readership to pay attention to Walker’s work, but it also suggested that *Jubilee* offered an alternative perspective to white Civil War fiction narratives which had previously been all that was available. *Jubilee*, however, did far more than just offer a fictionalized narrative from the perspective of Mammy and Prissy about what they really thought of their captivity and of mistresses like Scarlett O’Hara. Noting its “evocation of the folk experience and folk attitudes of Southern Negroes on the plantations,” reviewer Abraham Chapman declared that the novel brought a welcome breath of innovation to “a thoroughly quarried, frequently hackneyed genre of writing” that had been “the source of some of the crudest stereotypes of Negro characters in American fiction” (43). Chapman praises Walker for presenting the “little-known everyday life of the slaves” including their behavior, speech patterns, emotions, frustrations, and aspirations: “As it unfolds one sees plantation life as it was seen by Negro slaves, feels the texture of American history as it was felt by Negro slaves.” Reviewer Jane Oppenheim praised *Jubilee* for contributing “more than just historical value. It has great sociological significance.”

Because of the way in which Walker incorporated her family’s oral history as well as her research into nineteenth-century slave narratives and because her groundbreaking novel

approached the subject of slavery from the perspective of those “looking up from the bottom rather than down from the top,” Walker has been repeatedly credited with creating the genre of the neo-slave narrative (“How I Wrote” 64). The novel defined “a subject of representation that would come to predominate in the African American novel for the rest of the twentieth century. Literally dozens of novels about slaves and slavery appeared in the wake of *Jubilee*” (Rushdy, “The Neo-Slave Narrative” 87). Although, as Ashraf Rushdy observes, it would take five more years before the second novel in this genre appeared with Ernest Gaines’s *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), and four more years for the third with Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975), “an African American novel about slavery would become almost annual fare thereafter.”

Jubilee, like the other two neo-slave narratives under discussion in this study, is based on real-life figures and slave history. Deriving her historical novel from the narrative passed down from her grandmother, Walker is not only sharing an African American perspective of Civil War history but she is also tracing the connection between twentieth-century American culture and its past. By appropriating and re-imagining historical narratives, Walker asserts the value of African American womanhood, history, community, and voice. Her historical novel draws from and critiques the nineteenth-century sentimental tradition in order to promote a humanist philosophy that acknowledges African American suffering and suggests a new way forward. In Walker’s rendering, African American suffering takes on a divine purpose that teaches a sentimental message of love, forgiveness, and redemption. Thus, the African American woman, who is placed at the center of both family and community, not only has the power to endure suffering but also to teach others how to extend sympathy and healing. Thus, Walker creates a sentimental female lineage that promotes African American community, connecting contemporary racial problems with the past while also finding hope for the future.

Jubilee follows the life of Vyry, a light-skinned, light-haired enslaved woman born in the novel's opening pages to Sis Hetta (who dies in childbirth) and her white master, John Morris Dutton. As Vyry grows up on a Georgia plantation, she is protected by the benevolently neglectful Dutton, who ensures that she is raised by a caring mammy and placed as a house servant. However, Vyry is also persecuted by Dutton's jealous wife, Salina, who physically abuses the girl and torments her when Dutton is away. Dutton and his wife have a son, Johnny, who resembles Salina in temper, and a daughter, Lillian, who closely resembles Vyry in age and physical appearance. Vyry eventually falls in love with Randall Ware, a dark-skinned freeman who runs a smithy and owns property in the same county as the Dutton plantation. Vyry desperately hopes that she can become free by marrying Ware or that he can buy her freedom, and while she has no illusions that Salina would do all she could to prevent it, Vyry is deeply disillusioned when Dutton himself refuses to allow Vyry to become free. Vyry and Randall have two children together, Jim and Minna.

As tensions rise leading up to the Civil War, Randall must leave the state of Georgia or be forced into slavery. Asking Vyry to escape with him, he insists that she must leave her children behind. Because she cannot leave them but still tries to run, Vyry is captured and is whipped nearly to death. Although the war causes some changes on the plantation—Dutton, Johnny, and Lillian's husband go to war and leave the women to manage, there are fewer white overseers, some field slaves are sent to work in the Atlanta munitions factory while a few others manage to escape—Vyry continues to cook for the family and wait for Randall's return. All of the Dutton men are mortally wounded in the war but manage to return home before dying. Salina, grieved at the loss of her family members, continues to run the plantation, but she dies of a massive stroke after hearing loud Yankee guns firing at a rebel gunboat on the Chattahoochee

River. Lillian is left to run the plantation alone. A year later, Union soldiers arrive at their doorstep, read the Emancipation Proclamation, and raid the plantation of all goods and valuables. The few slaves who remain joyfully embrace their freedom and join the army as it continues on, but Vyry stays to wait for Randall. Innis Brown, an army follower, stays behind and saves Vyry from assault; he helps to farm the plantation and waits for Vyry to decide that Randall isn't returning. Lillian is attacked the same night as Vyry, and when they find her the next morning, she has been so traumatized that she can no longer take care of herself. Vyry agrees to wait several more months, hoping that Randall will return, and sends word to Lillian's relatives about her condition.

Vyry eventually agrees to go and, seven years after Randall first left, marries Innis. Together, Vyry and Innis, who eventually have a son together, travel throughout Georgia and Alabama attempting to find a place to settle with their family. Because of Reconstruction racial tension, they find trouble with whites everywhere they go, and Vyry realizes that they are treated well only when whites assume she is white and that Innis is her servant. Their first home is flooded because they settle away from a white town near a river, and their second house is burned to the ground by the Ku Klux Klan. Vyry is reluctant to build again near a white town, but when the townspeople discover her ability to serve as a midwife, they welcome the family and help them build a new house. Although Randall moves back to Georgia and tries to find Vyry, he discovers she is remarried, so he doesn't approach the family until he finds out about tension between Jim—now a teenager—and Innis. He arrives unexpectedly to take Jim and send him to school, which allows Vyry, Innis, and Randall to share their past experiences and realize that the marriage between Vyry and Randall is truly over. The novel closes with Vyry's contentedly preparing for another child with Innis, happy that tension has been resolved among

her family and caring for her home with her daughter Minna.

Because of Walker's faithfulness to her grandmother's biography as well as the extensive focus on historical context (which will be discussed later in this chapter), there exists some critical debate as to whether *Jubilee* should be classified as a neo-slave narrative or a transitional text that signals a shift from nineteenth-century straightforward oral narrative to the "fictionalized slavery and freedom literature of the late twentieth century" (Beaulieu 15). Phillis Klotman deplores early comparisons between *Jubilee* and *Gone With the Wind*, arguing that Walker's novel is not historical romance because it does not conjure up the "tightly girdled, hoop-skirted lilies" of white plantation tradition and instead records black folk history (139). Babacar Dieng argues that *Jubilee* is a historical novel that gave rise to the neo-slave narrative in its present form, an "ancestor of a wave of neo-enslaved narratives and African-American historical fictions . . . a product of the thirties which gave impetus to the revisionist movement reclaiming African-American history" that didn't take hold until the 1960s (117). Holly Martis credits the work as a historical novel that was "truly groundbreaking work" for its subject matter and for "giving rise to a whole cultural industry" (49). Begun in 1934 and completed in 1965, Walker's novel understandably makes use of multiple literary traditions. However, few if any scholars have recognized its incorporation of the sentimental mode.

"Why has God let me live?": Suffering and Divine Agency

Scholars have noted that Walker's portrayal of Vyry as a perpetually optimistic and fortunate individual despite her experiences in slavery seems, at times, unrealistic or exaggerated. Hortense Spillers criticizes the novel for an allegorical propensity, arguing that "Walker adopts a syntax and semantics whose meanings are recognizable in an explanation of

affairs in human time. But these delegated efficacies register at a deeper level of import so that ‘nature,’ for instance, is nature and something more, and character itself acts in accordance with the same kind of mystical or ‘unrealistic’ tendencies” (301). Walker, however, has defended her portrayal, explaining that although she has taken “the license of the imaginative worker,” she has “tried to be honest” in portraying her great-grandmother, who

was shaped by the forces that dominated her life. In the Big House and in the Quarters, she was raised according to Christian ethics, morality, and faith, and she could not react any other way. Her philosophy of life was a practical one, and she succeeded in getting the things she wanted and prayed for. She realized that hatred wasn't necessary and would have corroded her own spiritual well-being. (“How I Wrote” 62-63)

Suffering—learning through suffering and reader sympathy attained through suffering—is a key aspect of the sentimental mode. While in *Charlotte Temple* or *The Coquette* errant young women are punished for mistakes by suffering dire consequences, later sentimental novels show that suffering is instructive and brings the sufferer closer to God and family, as in *The Wide, Wide World* and *The Lamplighter*. As a woman who suffers through no fault of her own and is the victim of mistreatment due to her enslavement and to others’ maliciousness, Vyry’s misery eventually brings her to an understanding of God and humanity akin to the experiences of nineteenth-century sentimental heroines. Although protected as a child from physical abuse, when Vyry enters the home of her master and father as a servant, she is exposed to his benign neglect and his wife’s malicious assaults. Finding fault with Vyry’s every attempt to serve, Salina kicks her, slaps her, throws a pot of urine in her face, and hangs her by her thumbs from hooks in a closet: “Vyry’s toes barely touched the floor . . . with her arm-pits hurting so bad, she lost consciousness of everything and did not know how long she hung there in torture” (32).

Although Vyry is persecuted for her light skin and her too-close resemblance to Lillian, Walker is careful to connect Salina’s vengeful abuse to the abuse all slaves suffer at the hands of

their owners. While John and Salina Dutton contradict claims that the slaves are unhappy, claiming that only abolitionist ideas might upset them because “[t]hey are all well treated, and we love them and take good care of them just like a part of our family. When they are sick we nurse them back to health. We feed and clothe them and teach them the Christian religion” (82), Vyry witnesses field hands whipped to death, watches Salina slap and kick servants and force cooks to drink ipecac to make sure they aren’t eating the food, and sees the overseer brand a runaway slave on her face with the letter “R.” Slaves die of plague and lack of medical care and are punished for stealing food when they don’t have enough to eat. The overseer violently murders slaves who are torn between following Dutton’s and the overseer’s contradictory orders because their “resistance” makes him angry. And while Dutton grows incensed when the overseer kills a slave, Salina points out that he’s “the best overseer in the county . . . he knows how to handle nigras, and a good driver is hard to find. You’d better leave him alone” (135).

When Vyry is caught attempting to escape with her children, she is whipped like any other runaway. Returning to the plantation, she knows that her father, who was often away, will not interfere: “there would be no compassion. It was a well-known fact that if a slave ran away and was caught in the act, flogging was the punishment” (171). Vyry is tied to a whipping post, naked to the waist, with hands and feet “stretched as far as they could without touching the earth beneath her . . . or reaching beyond the post” (172). A guard “who was generally hired to whip slaves”—a man whose main job was to inflict these kinds of beatings—lashes Vyry with “a raw-hide coach-whip used to spur the horses.” The description of Vyry’s whipping is graphic, focusing equally on her pain and on the cuts to her flesh:

The whip burned like fire and cut the blood out of her and stung like red-hot pins sticking in her flesh while her head was reeling and whirling. It hurt so badly she felt as if her flesh were a single molten flame, and before she could catch her breath and brace herself again, he had wrapped the whip around her the second time . . . She was whirling

around in a cutting, fiery wind while the fire was burning her flesh like a tormenting fever and she kept sinking down in the fire and fighting the blackness until every light went out like a candle and she fainted. (172-73)

After Vyry wakes, cut loose from the whipping post and lying on the ground—other slaves collect her and tend to her after dark for they are fearful of openly showing care for her—she wonders why she has survived and asks herself, “Why has God let me live?” and prays “*Lawd, have mercy, Jesus! Send somebody to get me soon, please Jesus!*” (174).

By posing such a question immediately after a horrifically rendered flogging, Walker implies that Vyry’s suffering does indeed have a Godly purpose, although what that purpose is will not be revealed until later in the novel. It also implies a connection between Vyry and Jesus Christ, as her position on the wooden post suggests. Although Vyry does not ask if God has forsaken her, as Christ does before His crucifixion, both questions link bodily suffering with divine purpose and spiritual redemption. On the cross, Christ asks “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” shortly before dying (*King James Version*, Matt. 27:46), which many Biblical scholars believe is a reference to Psalm 22. The Psalm begins with the exact question and, written 600 years before the crucifixion, appears to predict some of the suffering Christ experienced such as dehydration, pierced hands and feet, and the Roman guards dividing his clothing by casting lots.²⁷ When Christ’s question is interpreted as an acknowledgment of prophecy and His own role in fulfilling it, his suffering becomes *necessary* to the redemption of mankind. Through this acknowledgment, Christ reminds witnesses of his agency because he repeatedly accepts his pain and determines that it shall be transformed into forgiveness and

²⁷ Psalm 22:11-18 reads: “Be not far from me; for trouble is near; for there is none to help. Many bulls have compassed me: strong bulls of Bashan have beset me round. They gaped upon me with their mouths, as a ravening and a roaring lion. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels. My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death. For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet. I may tell all my bones: they look and stare upon me. They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture” (*King James Version*).

redemption (of himself and others). Thus, Walker suggests that African American suffering under slavery is part of a larger divine destiny, and this parallel is significant because Vyry's suffering is necessary to her understanding of herself and the world. She develops a Christ-like philosophy of suffering, forgiveness, and love that provides agency through the acceptance of suffering.

"from pillar to post": A Legacy of Suffering

The implication of an "unfolding of the Divine Will" in *Jubilee* is precisely what Hortense Spillers describes in her essay "A Hateful Passion, A Lost Love" (299). Drawing on Paul Tillich's definition of a "theonomy" in which "[h]uman history is shot through with Divine Presence so that its being and time are consistent with a plan that elaborates and completes the will of God," Spillers argues that "in Walker's novel agents (or characters) are moving and are moved under the aegis of a Higher and Hidden Authority." Spillers contends that Walker's "characters are larger than life; that they are overdrawn, that, in fact, their compelling agency and motivation are ahistorical, despite the novel's solid historical grounding" (301). Vyry and her family "become the privileged center of human response," and through them the novel becomes "an interrogation into the African-American character in its poignant national destiny and through its female line of spiritual descent" (299, 305). It is important to recognize, however, that Walker is doing more than just arguing for a Divine Presence or Plan behind Emancipation and Reconstruction while tracing a female lineage for African American cultural survival. Walker is also drawing upon a history of sentimentalism which connects suffering to moral redemption and places women at the center of a new world order; she rewrites this moral order with an enslaved African American woman at its center. In Walker's novel, the heroic,

individualistic African American male ends up alone, isolated from his family, clinging to his militant views. Meanwhile the white female heroine, destroyed by her suffering, loses her mind. It is only the African American woman who both suffers and embraces sentimental ideals who interprets a Divine purpose from that suffering and is able to lead her family—and by extension her community—forward.

After the Civil War, Vyry experiences new forms of suffering because freedom from slavery does not mean freedom from discrimination and abuse by whites. Industrious and hopeful, Vyry and Innis Brown look for a piece of land to farm and to build a house for their growing family, but they experience constant setbacks. When they first set up a small farm on the low country land of the Chattahoochee River in Alabama, they believe they have a chance to realize their dreams. Innis, however, quickly realizes that “they would be better off the less they went into town” where he had encountered a white man who “talked pretty rough to me” and “[t]old me niggers was made to work for white folks and all this free nonsense warn’t agoing to work” (328). Although Innis and Vyry are puzzled that the man didn’t object to their settling near the river, they discover why he acted “kinda satisfied” about their location when their land floods dangerously that spring. The family is trapped in the loft of the house for three days, losing their cow and all of the newly planted crops. As they wait for the water to recede, Vyry tells the children the story of Noah and the ark, closing with the ominous prophecy that “God told Noah by the rainbow sign / No more water, but the fire next time” (336).

In their search for a new home, Innis and Vyry are next fooled into taking over a sharecropper’s lease despite their hopes of living an independent life, free of white control. They find a white family on a failed farm who claim to be moving and willing to let the family take over the house and land. After settling in, however, Vyry and Innis are surprised by the

appearance of a white man who claims the property and forces them to sign a sharecropping contract. Neither can read or write, but Innis makes his mark, and the family does its best to farm the hardscrabble land without purchasing any seed or provisions from the sharecroppers' store. However, at the end of the year, the white landowner claims that they've taken a large amount of store credit and adds the amount to the money he insists is owed. Despite knowing they are being cheated, they are forced to accept a debt that is added to "next year's bill" and sign another contract (361). Vyry and Innis realize they have been trapped into the cycle of work and debt that maintains a form of economic servitude akin to slavery: "That white man means trouble, and we ain't never gwin git outen his debt. Another year he'll tack on some more, and knowing us is ignorant will just make it worsen Lawd, we ain't staying on this here bad land and letting that white man get us more and more in debt until we can't even much eat."

Vyry and Innis escape to Troy, Alabama, where Vyry finds work cooking for the Jacobsons, a wealthy white family that owns many properties. Although Vyry is concerned about the rowdy behavior of local African Americans and the presence of the Ku Klux Klan, the Jacobsons help the family secure a tract of land outside of town. However, once Vyry and Innis build a house and begin to focus on farming, the family's growing independence removes them from the Jacobsons' protection and puts them at risk for Klan vengeance. Vyry angers Mrs. Jacobson when she stops cooking for them to focus on caring for her own home and newborn child, angrily telling her that "you colored people don't want to work the way you useta you need not come back" (373-74). Shortly after, while Vyry's daughter Minna is home alone, three white boys enter the house, threatening her and baby Harry with a razor. The boys are startled into leaving when Innis, Vyry, and their oldest son come home, but a few days later they see the Ku Klux Klan burn down their house as they return from Sunday evening church services. After

losing her home and possessions, Vyry falls into a deep depression, wondering if her family's continuous suffering is a message from God: "I done tried and tried. We is done from pillar to post, and just when I thought we was bout to git us a home at last, they done burned all we got to the ground. Why, Lawd? Just tell me, why?...What is I done to them white folks? Lawd, what is I done? Is you punishing us, and is I just ungrateful?" (379).

Once again, Vyry and Innis search for a place to safely settle. With help from the Union army and the Freedman's Bureau, they claim a farm outside of Greenville, Georgia. Vyry, however, is reluctant to rebuild—insisting that the family live in a tent—because she continues to sense white resentment against African Americans. However, once Vyry demonstrates her abilities as a midwife, the members of the town ask the family to stay because they need her services. The white townspeople hold a house-raising and a quilting bee in order to help the family get started, and Vyry feels a sense of "friendship and understanding from their new neighbors" (441). So, while Vyry and Innis believe they have finally found refuge and relief from white violence and discrimination, Vyry is deeply disturbed when tensions between her oldest son and husband erupt into physical violence. Jim had accidentally let the sow—an important investment for the family—die, so Innis whips Jim. Stepping into the middle of the fight, Vyry defends her son from further beating, arguing with Innis about the use of physical punishment on her children: "you ain't gwine browbeat and mistreat nobody here, not long as I'm living and I can help it" (449). The fight upsets her, not only because of the strife between her son and husband, but because

all that confusion in her house yesterday went back to something in her life that she thought she had forever escaped. It brought back all the violence and killing on the plantation when Grimes was driving and beating field hands to death. It brought back the horror of the deaths of Mammy Sukey, and Grandpa Tom, the branding of Lucy, and burning the old men to death, the plague, and the hanging, murder, and fire, when the slaves all knew their lives were not worth a copper cent with a hole in it Now this

awful hatred and violence was threatening to destroy her happy home and her loving family. It was in her own brand-new house. (453)

Thus, Vyry realizes that the violence of the past continues to haunt her present, not just in the form of the Ku Klux Klan and white discrimination, but within her own family and its potential to act out of the pain and trauma that was inflicted by those who have mistreated them. “Deeply shocked,” Vyry “knew she herself had been capable of killing Innis Brown” out of her anger and her desire to protect her children (454), thus acknowledging that the capacity for violence is in her as well.

“you can lick the world with a loving heart”: Redemptive Forgiveness as an African American Sentimental Model

Vyry, “sick of the killing and violence . . . sick of hate that went with it” asks, “Was this kind of evil going to follow her all the days of her life?” (454). Vyry’s question has relevance for both her time and generations of African Americans living with a legacy of slavery and racial violence into the twentieth century and beyond. Each of the three neo-slave narratives under discussion in this study deals with the contemporary legacy of slavery, the ways in which the wounds of the past contribute to the realities of the present, both in white and African American communities. But in *Jubilee*, Vyry presents a model of learning through suffering, an African American destiny in which suffering of Biblical proportions can either be absorbed within and perpetuated by those who were victims of it or transformed into redemptive love and forgiveness that has the power to help them survive.

Vyry, therefore, turns to God and goes to the woods to pray, just as Jesus frequently withdraws himself from friends and disciples to refresh himself and find guidance in prayer.²⁸ In

²⁸ Jesus prays in the garden of Gethsemane, the night after the Feast of the Passover, knowing of the pain, suffering and humiliation to come before his crucifixion and death.

the woods, Vyry falls to her knees and tells God “I’m suffering so, Lord, my body is heavy like I’m carrying a stone. I come to ask you to move the stone, Jesus.” Vyry prays that they “can’t go on like this no longer, Lord. We can’t keep on a-fighting, and a-fussing, and a-cussing, and a-hating I’m asking you to let your forgiving love cover our sin” (454-55). Relieved of her burden—whether that stone represents trauma, pain, suffering, guilt, or all of it—Vyry believes that forgiveness and love are the only way forward. She tells her son to let go of his anger against Innis, a metaphor for the larger anger they’ve held inside for the abuses they suffered in slavery and from racist whites:

Keeping hatred inside makes you git mean and evil inside. We supposen to love everybody like God loves us. And when you forgives you feels sorry for the one what hurt you, you returns love for hate, and good for evil. And that stretches your heart and makes you bigger inside with a bigger heart so’s you can love everybody when your heart is big enough. Your chest get broad like this, and you can lick the world with a loving heart! (457)

Vyry argues that by returning love for hate, forgiveness for violence, people not only avoid being poisoned by the violence done against them but they become stronger than those who commit the violence.

Although the family has been “from pillar to post,” Vyry recognizes that God has not been punishing them, and this belief allows her to have faith in human goodness regardless of skin color. Vyry, therefore, argues for a view of humanity that looks beyond race, offering a hopeful vision of the world that suggests racial division arises from a lack of sympathy—from the fear and jealousy that occurs from not knowing others as human beings:

I don’t believe the world is full of peoples what hates everybody. I just doesn’t believe it. I knows lots of times folks doesn’t know other folks and then they gits to thinking crazy things, but when you gits up to peoples and gits to know them, you finds out they’s got kind hearts and tender feelings just like everybody else. Only ways you can keep folks hating is to keep them apart and separated from each other. Of course I knows they’s plenty evil peoples in the world, look like they’s just born evil and the devil’s they companion, but I just doesn’t believe its cause they’s white or black. I doesn’t believe

every white person's evil and every black person's good. (474)

Vyry's views are contrasted with those of her ex-husband Randall Ware, who has become embittered and militant because of his own suffering, such as his expulsion from the legislature and loss of the vote, being forced to sell his land to whites, and beatings and intimidation by the Ku Klux Klan. Ware's anger not only prevents him from overcoming the suffering he has experienced, but it causes him to distance himself from God and adopt color-line divisions that embrace a "with us or against us" mentality: "You can keep your white Christian God along with all your good white friends because I never could stand hypocrites You got his color and his blood and you got his religion, too, so your mind is divided between black and white" (480). Through Ware, Walker acknowledges the historical controversy within the African American community regarding the ways in which religion has been used as an oppressive force as well as the desire to adopt a militant stance against white violence and discrimination.

Ultimately, the message of forgiveness and sympathy prevails. Vyry argues against Ware, claiming that she "ain't gwine try to beat the white man at his own game with his killing and his hating" (482). Adopting the commonly used metaphor of the Jewish slaves' liberation from Egypt, Vyry declares "We's done come through slavery and we is free at last. I knows we's got to wander a while in the wilderness just like the children of Israel done under Moses, but when the battle's over we shall wear a crown" (483). Likening their suffering to a period of confusion and wandering provides a divine meaning to their suffering, shaping it into a journey with both a purpose and an end. After cataloging a list of abuses she has experienced, Vyry tears off her blouse to show her scarred back, weeping to show that she has indeed suffered a great deal. But she then returns to her message of forgiveness, concluding that if one of her abusers were to ask for food, "I would feed em. God knows I ain't got no hate in my heart for nobody I believes

in God and I believes in trying to love and help everybody, and I knows that humble is the way . . . that's my doctrine and I'm gwine to preach it to my childrens, every living one I got or ever hopes to have" (485).

Vyry's sentimental message is so strong that when she shares her views with Jim, she convinces him to forgive Innis despite his resentment and anger. As a result, she realigns the emotional center of the family: "The tension in the house began to ease The charged feelings in the house were dissipated as once again the family life revolved around the quietly confident Vyry, whose presence exuded her own inner peace" (458). Not only does Walker demonstrate the power of forgiveness, but she draws Vyry as the ideal sentimental woman who both embodies Christian sympathy and serves as the emotional and moral center of her family. "[T]ouched with a spiritual fire and permeated with a spiritual wholeness that had been forged in a crucible of suffering," Vyry was

only a living sign and mark of all the best that any human being could hope to become. In her obvious capacity for love, redemptive and forgiving love, she was alive and standing on the highest peaks of her time and human personality. Peasant and slave, unlettered and untutored, she was nevertheless the best true example of the motherhood of her race, an ever present assurance that nothing could destroy a people whose sons had come from her loins. (486)

Vyry's doctrine is that love and sympathy will overcome all racial strife and difference, will eventually overcome evil. The overall moral message is that good will overcome evil if the majority of those who suffering learn to hold onto God's love and forgive. Thus, there is a use and a purposefulness in suffering, which allows Vyry to serve as the emotional and spiritual leader of her family. In the same manner that sentimental novels reposition the mother and wife as central to the world order, the African American mother is positioned as central to the post-slavery world.

Appropriating Ancestral Voices: "Women follow the pattern of women who have gone before them"

Margaret Walker wrote *Jubilee* over the course of thirty years, drafting portions of the initial manuscript while a senior at Northwestern University in 1934, researching slave narratives and the history of the Civil War throughout her life, and completing the manuscript as her doctoral dissertation at the University of Iowa (1962-65). She first began thinking about writing a novel and her personal connection to African American history during her adolescence. The novel was published in 1966 and is largely based on the life and experiences of her maternal great-grandmother. Walker learned about her great-grandmother's life through her grandmother, Elvira Ware Dozier, who lived with her family until Walker was an adult. In her essay, "How I Wrote *Jubilee*," Walker recalls that her parents often came home late at night and found her "enthralled in my grandmother's stories" (51). When Walker's parents called the stories "tall tales," her grandmother protested that she was "not telling her tales; I'm telling her the naked truth." For Walker, *Jubilee* began in her childhood, while listening to her grandmother's stories of slavery: "I promised my grandmother that when I grew up I would write her mother's story."

For Walker, however, simply relating her personal family story was not enough. She knew she had received an invaluable oral history and was "determined to substantiate my material, to authenticate the story I had heard from my grandmother's lips. I was using literary documents to undergird the oral tradition" (56). Walker wanted to prove that the stories passed down to her were authentic and accurate. Walker spent thirty years researching *Jubilee*, reading Civil War histories and novels; accounts of southern history, laws and slave codes; congressional investigations of the Ku Klux Klan; plantation account books, diaries, letters, bills of sale, and other personal papers; and nineteenth-century slave narratives. What she found "further

corroborated the most valuable slave narrative of all, the living account of my great-grandmother, which had been transmitted to me by her own daughter” (57).

The stories her grandmother told her offered Walker a deeply human, family-based perspective on the effects and costs of slavery that went further than records of battles and troop movements. Her oral history gave names and faces to the human suffering of centuries of slavery, extending beyond partisan abolitionist debates and connecting the seemingly distant past to the contemporary struggle for African American equality. Researching the history of slavery and confirming her grandmother’s story gave Walker a more acute awareness of the relationships among all people. Nuclear familial relationships became a microcosm for the human family, which in turn became the sentimental structure for her novel. “The story,” as Walker’s grandmother told it, “reflected the relationship of my great-grandmother to all people around her, black and white” (53).

Walker, however, also highlights the feminine structure of this humanist perspective, one which has traditionally linked both the sentimental novel and slave narratives: sentimental novels realign families and American culture around women and the home while female-authored slave narratives often associate women with maintaining family and community in the face of social forces that sought to tear them apart. “I think you recognize the humanistic value of *Vyry*” Walker observes in an interview with Lucy Friebert, “because whether it’s Aunt Sally or Mammy Sukey, whether it is Miss Lillian or Miss Lucy, you see the kinship of women” (53). In writing her neo-slave narrative, Walker not only connects humanism to feminine sympathy but develops an ancestry that has been passed down through the female line of her family:

I realized when I finished the book that I had never known *Vyry*, but I knew her daughter, and she was like *Vyry*. My mother said, “Oh, you’ve got my grandmother down. She was just like that.” I said, “But you know I was really using grandma.” Then she said, “Well Mamma was like grandma.” And I said, “And my mother was like her

mother.” I’m like my mother. The older I get, the more I look like my mother and I think like my mother. My grandmother was just like her mother. Women are like their mothers. (53)

Walker, in essence, is able to appropriate the voice of her ancestors because they have the *same* voice. By developing this lineage, Walker not only creates the authority to speak for and as her own female ancestors, but she suggests that all women are similarly connected to their own female lines: “Women follow the pattern of women who have gone before them.” Through sympathy, then, women become connected to each other. Just as Walker’s historical research supports the veracity of her grandmother’s narrative, Walker’s sympathetic lineage provides her with the authority to write *Vyry* as a voice that speaks generally for African American experience, offering a humanist philosophy based on sentimental kinship.

Walker strongly values this sense of lineage, viewing her work as deeply connected to both the past and present: “for black people, the 20th century has been a century of protest. And in all my work I look first at the historical perspective. I’m always looking back in order to understand what’s happening today, and what may happen tomorrow. If we understand yesterday, then we know what’s happening today, and we can reasonably predict what will happen tomorrow” (Graham 280). Like the sentimental literature of the past, Walker’s writing attempts to bring readers closer to the history she represents in order to influence them toward social change:

I talked about freedom . . . I attempted to understand what it meant to have social change and its benefits for black people and their rights . . . some of us are too old to understand the kind of social change we need in this country, but our children are not too young. We owe them another world; we owe them another mind to face the future . . . Black women writers, and particularly myself, have faced three main problems or conflicts in all our work: racism, fascism, and sexism. I think I have been fighting them all my writing career. (284)

Storytelling not only shaped Walker but also revealed a strong female lineage capable of

survival, leadership, and social change. Thus, Walker, by inviting readers into her family history also asks them to experience a larger shared history as an epic, redemptive journey toward freedom.

CHAPTER 6

Octavia Butler's *Kindred*: "My face too was wet with tears"

Octavia Butler was the first African American woman to make a name for herself writing science fiction; she remains one of the few African American writers—along with Samuel R. Delany—to have achieved success in the field. After developing a love of reading and an interest in science fiction as a child, Butler was inspired to try her hand at writing after watching a bad science fiction movie on television and deciding that she could write something better herself. Over the course of her career, she published eleven novels as well as numerous short stories and nonfiction pieces. Although Butler, who died in 2006, achieved a successful career in science fiction, winning some of the most prestigious awards in the field, including multiple Hugo and Nebula Awards as well as a MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant, she always resisted being pigeonholed as a genre writer. Not only did she complicate the science fiction genre by consistently including African American women as empowered characters whose social positions challenge American racial stereotypes, but the themes of her novels and stories frequently deal with issues of bondage and freedom. Butler’s work often drew from her experiences growing up in a working-class African American community during the Civil Rights period and is frequently rooted in African American history and literature.

Butler is arguably best known for her novel, *Kindred*, published in 1979. She has long maintained that *Kindred* is actually fantasy, rather than science fiction, because no science is involved in the time travel that occurs in the novel. *Kindred* is also a neo-slave narrative because it tells the story of a young African American woman who is trapped in bondage to a Maryland

planter. The twist, however, is that Butler centers her story around a contemporary woman named Dana who lives in California in the year 1976 but is called back in time, repeatedly, to the early 1800s in order to save the life of a white ancestor and slave owner. Dana, who is a writer and is married to a white man, one day disappears from her home and finds herself on the banks of a river. She realizes that a white boy is drowning and saves his life, returning to her own time when the boy's father arrives and threatens her with a gun. A series of jumps in time ensue, and Dana realizes that she may only be home in California for hours or days but can return to Maryland at a time years after her previous visit. Similarly, she can spend weeks or months in antebellum Maryland, living as a slave, and be returned to her home only hours after she disappears.

The problem for Dana is that she has no control over her trips in time; with her returns to the past, she realizes that the boy—who gradually grows into an adult—is Rufus Weylin, a man who will eventually father one of her female ancestors. Although neither Rufus nor Dana knows how she is called back in time, Dana arrives to save his life each time Rufus is in mortal danger, and Dana realizes she must keep him alive so that Hagar Weylin may one day be born. This situation places Dana in a difficult position because she comes to feel familial affection toward Rufus even as she abhors enabling the awful things he does. Thus, when Rufus falls in love with a free woman named Alice and rapes her, he creates a chain of events whereby Dana saves him from being beaten to death by the woman's enslaved husband. Then Alice and her husband flee, are captured, are nearly beaten to death, and Rufus buys Alice and forces her to become his mistress. Dana, knowing that Alice will eventually give birth to Hagar, hates Rufus's actions but continues to save his life. Even as Dana brings modern views of her own identity, equality, and humanity with her to the past, she is forced into the role of a slave in order to survive the

nineteenth century. Dana also develops strong friendships with other household slaves, and while she feels affection for and loyalty to other slaves as well as outrage at their (and her) mistreatment, her affection for Rufus causes her conflict and confusion. *Kindred* concludes when Hagar is finally born but Alice, unable to escape to freedom and no longer able to tolerate her position as Rufus's mistress, kills herself. Distraught and suicidal, Rufus turns to Dana and wants her to take Alice's place in his life. Although Dana views Rufus as a younger brother and recognizes his intense attachment to her, she is shocked that his affection is transformed into an assumed right of sexual access to her body. While she had witnessed and deplored the ways women were sexually exploited by their masters, Dana had felt protected by her relationship with Rufus and her own modern perspective, knowing that this violation of self and body was a line she could not cross. When Rufus attempts to rape her, Dana kills him, sending her home for the final time and permanently releasing her from her bondage.

Kindred uses the time travel plot device to bring Dana in close contact with her literal past—both by forcing her to interact with her ancestors and by placing her, as a modern-day African American woman, in the conditions of antebellum slavery. Science fiction becomes a sentimental vehicle for confronting the legacy of slavery in the United States and pushing at the limits of sympathy. By collapsing the boundaries between past and present, Butler awakens Dana—and the modern reader—to the experiences of her enslaved ancestors. Whereas nineteenth-century sentimental novels drew metaphors of equation in order to show that unlike groups suffer in similar or parallel ways (i.e., white women understand enslaved women because the death of a child is like the loss of a child to a slave sale), Butler's *Kindred* shows that Dana suffers in the same way as her ancestors given like conditions. She moves Dana from being an observer of suffering to a suffering subject. This breaking of boundaries enables Butler to

collapse history and show the close linkage between past and present attitudes toward race and gender.

Collapsing History, Questioning Sympathy

Butler's novel addresses similar historical themes to Walker's *Jubilee* insofar as both authors confront the legacy of American slavery in the twentieth century. However, while Walker writes a historical novel set in the nineteenth century that takes the modern reader back in time, Butler's narrative moves the protagonist back and forth across the historical distance, straddling both the past and the contemporary eras. By doing so, *Kindred* more directly links twentieth-century racial attitudes and cultural perspectives to their formation in slavery while also revealing the ways in which members of American society—both black and white—have developed a cultural amnesia that erases the origins of their beliefs as well as the humanity of their ancestors. Dana, at the beginning of the novel, “has virtually no historical awareness” (Beaulieu 118). Realizing how little she understands about the nineteenth-century, Dana tries to increase her knowledge of the historical period during the brief times she is back home: “I read books about slavery, fiction and nonfiction. I read everything I had in the house that was even distantly related to the subject—even *Gone With the Wind*, or part of it. But its version of happy darkies in tender loving bondage was more than I could stand” (116). Dana often finds this book knowledge insufficient or inaccurate in comparison to her real-life experiences. References to Margaret Mitchell's “loving bondage” are contradicted by clear physical and emotional abuse, and even Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* fails to accurately represent her experience, such as when she sees that the children on the Weylin plantation are fed in the cookhouse: “I was glad to see them there because I'd read about kids their age being rounded up and fed from troughs

like pigs” (72). Dana can’t even rely on a family oral history, which is often a strong component of African American family and culture. When trying to discern her connection to Rufus Weylin, she eventually puzzles out that he must be an ancestor because she remembers the last name of a distant great-grandmother born Hagar Weylin, whose parents are listed in the family Bible as Rufus Weylin and “Alice Green-something Weylin” (28). But, Dana wonders, “why hadn’t someone in my family mentioned that Rufus Weylin was white? If they knew. Probably they didn’t.”

Furthermore, even though Dana lives in an era of growing freedom, her entire approach to history as well as her perspective on her time in the nineteenth-century is different from that of her husband—who is white—because of their differing skin colors. Kevin is progressive and anti-racist; he loves his wife and wants to protect her from harm. When he is pulled back in time with Dana, he gets into trouble because “he couldn’t tell the difference ‘tween black and white” (150). But although Kevin abhors slavery, his relationship to it is different because he is never subject to being made a slave himself. His masculinity and his white privilege protects him, affording him far greater agency than others whose skin color relegates them to a status with fewer—if any—social rights and freedoms. Kevin at first thinks that the chance to view history up close could be fascinating, telling Dana that it “could be a great time to live in” because a person could “go West and watch the building of the country, see how much of the Old West mythology is true” (97). When Dana points out that the West is “where they’re doing it to the Indians instead of the blacks,” she highlights a significant difference in their perspectives: Kevin thinks of history from a position of white privilege that does not consider the subjugation of other peoples, whereas Dana is more aware of non-white perspectives about the period. Kevin takes the role of Dana’s master when they are together in antebellum Maryland, assuming this

right by skin color alone, and there are no restrictions on his freedom to leave Maryland when he is left behind and must wait for Dana to return.

Sentimental novels operate by developing emotional bonds and affective communities in order to extend sympathy across social divisions and reveal moral truths, particularly through shared experiences of suffering. *Kindred* simultaneously employs and critiques sentimentalism. It creates emotional connection across the lines of history in order to explore the legacy of American slavery while acknowledging the flaws in a system that teaches moral truths through assuming sympathetic identification with an “Other” whose experiences cannot fully be understood. On the one hand, *Kindred* shows that it is impossible for an individual of privilege to truly understand the suffering of another: an individual with social protection or status is always inhibited and limited by those very benefits from truly understanding the suffering of one without that protection. Thus, privilege in *Kindred* includes whiteness, maleness, and wealth, as well as the privilege of having lived in a post-slavery period with additional freedoms.

One of the ways in which *Kindred* mimics the sentimental novel and invites sympathy across these boundaries is through the technique of character doubling. Butler takes great pains to show physical similarities between Dana and Alice, the woman who will become the mother of Hagar Weylin. A patroller who mistakes Dana for Alice’s mother exclaims, “[y]ou could be her sister, her twin sister, almost” (41). The two women grow as close as sisters during Dana’s time in Maryland; Dana nurses Alice from near death to full health, and the two of them spar frequently, fighting and making up. Dana and Alice are also both closely connected to Rufus, who involves Dana in his coercion of Alice and is emotionally attached to both women. He calls them “[o]ne woman. Two halves of a whole,” and attempts to rape Dana after Alice’s death because he believes he can substitute Dana for Alice (257). Rufus and Kevin are also paralleled,

and while there are significant differences between the two, the doubling implies an alignment of racial power and sexual access between the past and present. Both Rufus and Kevin claim ownership of Dana; although Kevin serves as Dana's master for appearances and protection while they are in antebellum Maryland, he has the "right" of ownership because of his race and gender. This role puts him in the same category as Rufus, who views him as competition because he intends to claim those rights to Dana in Kevin's absence. Dana feels the slippage between the role of husband and master when she and Kevin want to maintain their marital relationship. Since their marriage is not recognized during that time, they maintain the "charade" that Kevin, as Dana's master, has taken her to bed. Except, in that time period, no one believes it is pretending, and Dana feels disturbed, "almost as though I really was doing something shameful, happily playing whore for my supposed owner" (97). The parallel, as well, between Rufus's ownership and sexual contact with Alice—Dana's double—and Kevin's "ownership" and sexual contact with Dana, suggests that power dynamics within modern relationships are still subject to an historical imbalance of power that cannot yet be forgotten.

Exploring the Limits of Sentimental Identification

Dana begins the novel unable to comprehend the suffering she witnesses. Although she responds to others' suffering, her reaction is to pull away and separate herself because she cannot comprehend it. When Dana witnesses white patrollers beating a man in front of his wife and child, she is faced with a reality that is too horrific for her to process: "I could literally smell his sweat, hear every ragged breath, every cry, every cut of the whip. I could see his body jerking, convulsing, straining against the rope as his screaming went on and on . . . I shut my eyes and tensed my muscles against an urge to vomit" (36). She has a physical and emotional response to

the man's suffering—she feels sick and terrified—but she closes her eyes to try and stop her witnessing. She also recognizes that nothing has prepared her for this reality, so she is unable to process it. No experience from her life would have allowed her to comprehend this man's suffering because what she has witnessed only imitated suffering:

I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their backs and heard their well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn't lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me. In fact, she and I were reacting very much alike. My face too was wet with tears. And my mind was darting from one thought to another, trying to tune out the whipping. (36)

Imaginative identification does not compare to the reality before her. Her own response is to “tune it out,” but like the child with her, she is overwhelmed by her witnessing and reduced to tears. One of the critiques of sentimentalism is that it prioritizes emotion over reality, separating the two and resulting in melodramatic emphasis in emotional scenes that lack realism. In this moment, Dana recognizes that twentieth-century cinematic portrayals of this kind of suffering not only lack the reality of what she has just witnessed—using “too-red blood” and “well-rehearsed screams”—but they also lack the human being's physical and emotional context. By smelling the man's sweat and hearing his breath, she understands that the man's suffering is real. By witnessing the child's tears and seeing the man's wife refuse to watch the beating, she recognizes that pain is emotional as well as physical, that those who love the sufferer are hurt by his pain. Thus, it is not glamorized suffering or melodramatic emotion but this connection—the affective bond that transfers pain between the sufferer and those who care for him or her—that enables sentimental identification to occur.

Despite her dark skin and her attempts to fit in, Dana is marked as an outsider to the plantation culture. Not only do plantation residents expect her to appear and disappear at random

intervals, never aging while the rest of them grow older, but Dana is also visually set apart because she wears twentieth-century clothing—jeans or pants during a time when women wore only dresses. She also speaks without a southern accent, tells Rufus not to call her a “nigger” because the term is offensive, and behaves—at least in private with Rufus—as an equal to whites. According to Rufus, Dana doesn’t “talk right or dress right or act right” (30). Although she tries to explain her accent by claiming to come from New York—a free state—Dana’s speaking style is a liability in nineteenth-century Maryland because it indicates her education to whites who worry about her ability to read and her likely abolitionist ideas. Thus, Nigel warns Dana that she sounds “[m]ore like white folks than some white folks” and that the master “don’t want no niggers ‘round here talking better than him, putting freedom ideas in our heads” (74). Whites aren’t Dana’s only problem: many African Americans aren’t sure where her loyalties lie because of the long-standing association between education and whiteness. Thus, when Dana tries to help Alice and her husband Isaac escape from Rufus, Isaac is distrustful, saying “[s]he sure don’t talk like no nigger I ever heard. Talks like she been mighty close with the white folks—for a long time” (119). Later, when Dana helps Alice to recover from her terrible wounds, Alice lashes out in anger and pain over losing Isaac and her freedom, calling Dana “Doctor-nigger Think you know so much. Reading-nigger. White-nigger! Why didn’t you know enough to let me die?” (160).

As an outsider to the nineteenth-century world, Dana’s first instinct is one of survival, to get out of the past and back to her own time alive and unharmed. She makes numerous references to survival, believing that a “slender . . . fine-boned” woman like Alice’s mother was “probably not as strong as she needed to be to survive in this era. But she was surviving, however painfully. Maybe she would help me learn how” (38). Because of her precarious

position as an African American woman in a white-ruled world, needing to be “owned” in order to be protected, Dana feels sure that she won’t make it without the guardianship of either Kevin or Rufus: “I don’t think I have much chance of surviving here alone” (82). Dana thinks primarily of existence and escape, of the hardships and suffering that African Americans—herself included—face. When she tells Kevin her fears and he points out that her ancestors had fewer advantages but still lived through it, Dana responds: “Strength. Endurance. To survive, my ancestors had to put up with more than I ever could. Much more” (51). Dana suggests there are limits to her suffering, implying that she could neither endure nor fully understand the lives her ancestors experienced. Not only does Dana reveal a broad gulf between her understanding of modern day and historical suffering, but such a view indicates a limit to sympathetic identification: if one places limits on one’s ability to suffer, can an individual sympathize with another person’s suffering if it exceeds those limits?

Because of those limits, Dana recognizes that she—and Kevin, during his first weeks there—relate to the people and the period from a distance, as though they are playing parts:

I began to realize why Kevin and I had fitted so easily into this time. We weren’t really in. We were observers watching a show. We were watching history happen around us. And we were actors. While we waited to go home, we humored the people around us by pretending to be like them. But we were poor actors. We never really got into our roles. We never forgot that we were acting. (98)

Dana recognizes the distance she has placed between herself and the people of the past; although subject to the same abuses, the same treatment, the same limits to her agency, she views her suffering as temporary and not a part of her true reality. She doesn’t acknowledge that she shares the suffering and experiences of others, placing distance between herself and them by anticipating an escape from that suffering. This gap allows her to maintain assumptions about the people she befriends and comes to care for, still viewing them with the judgment of a person who

maintains twentieth-century agency and sees nineteenth-century people as stereotypes instead of individuals. Responding to “Aunt” Sarah’s fear of talking about freedom and her assertion that she “can get along” because “[t]hings ain’t bad here,” Dana believes that Sarah

had done the safe thing—had accepted a life of slavery because she was afraid She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger, the handkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom—the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter. (145)

Feeling “[m]oral superiority” over “someone even less courageous than I was,” Dana doesn’t yet understand why someone would appear to choose her position in slavery and judges her with the disdain of a different era.

Shifting Subject Positions: Acquiring Sympathy Through Shared Suffering

Dana eventually confronts her judgments, her inability to understand her past and the people in it because she comes to care for Sarah and the others, seeing them as individuals. She also shares their suffering. The pain of labor and physical abuse, combined with the suffering caused by fear for the welfare of those she loves, moves Dana from her subject position—from the distant inheritor of slave history into the subjectivity of a slave. By repeated exposure to history, Dana changes from observer to sufferer. Her first transitional step occurs when she realizes that Rufus’s most effective means of control over her—since he chooses not to abuse her physically—is through her sympathy with others. Rufus forces Dana to help him manipulate Alice into sex by threatening to hurt Alice (more than he already has), knowing that causing her additional pain will hurt Dana, too. When he asks Dana to convince Alice to go to him, Dana at first refuses, so he threatens, “You want her to get hurt?” (163). Then, to further convince her, he threatens Dana directly: “You talk to her—talk some sense into her—or you’re going to watch

while Jake Edwards beats some sense into her!” Rufus doesn’t need to beat Dana herself, merely to force her watch Alice being beaten, causing her to feel as though she were responsible for Alice’s beating and suffer for the pain experienced by another. Although Dana is horrified by participating in the rape of another woman—that she terms it “rape” is a clear indication of how she views the coerced sexual relationship—she does see her role in convincing Alice as a way to mitigate at least some of her suffering: “I couldn’t refuse to help the girl—help her avoid at least some of the pain” (164).

Slaves are equally—if not more—afraid of separation from their families than they are of physical abuse, and Dana’s experience teaches her the strength of this threat. Her jumps back into the past mirror, in some ways, the risk and uncertainty of men and women whose marriages were not legally recognized, people who never knew if they would suddenly lose each other to sale or death. While sentimental novels often achieved sympathy for the enslaved by equating the separation of slave families through sale to the separation of loved ones through death (more familiar to white, middle class readers), Butler places twentieth-century Dana in the position of experiencing this form of suffering first-hand. Dana is separated from Kevin each time she is sent back into antebellum Maryland, leaving her uncertain whether she will return to him in the twentieth-century. But when Kevin is brought back with her—he is touching her when Rufus “calls,” so he time travels with her—her experience more closely parallels other enslaved African Americans because she leaves him in the past and doesn’t know if she will find him again. When Dana comes back to 1970s California without him, she later returns to antebellum Maryland to discover that five years have passed and Kevin has left for the Northern free states. She doesn’t know if she will be able to get word to him or if they will be reunited because she is dependent on Rufus to send a letter and because she isn’t sure where to find Kevin. Dana is not a

free woman: the Weylins accept that Kevin is her “owner,” and she has the status of a slave and is not allowed to act or move freely (even though Rufus knows the truth, his attachment to her means that he would prefer that Kevin *not* claim her so that he can “keep” her). Dana quickly learns the pain of separation as well as how difficult it would be to reunite with a loved one in “this horse-and-buggy era” (162) where African Americans are not supposed to be able to write and are barred from mailing letters, letters travel slowly or are lost, and journeys take months. Such difficulties make the pain of separation more acute: beyond the incredible barriers of slavery itself, if someone is sold or sent a long distance away, it would be highly unlikely for him or her to find family or loved ones again.

Although Rufus and his father are often indifferent to the sale of slaves when the purpose is financial, their knowledge of the pain it causes enables them to exert control in another manner beyond physical abuse. Dana experiences this when Rufus uses the threat of permanent separation from her husband to get what he wants from her: “You threaten me, I’ll threaten you. Without me, you’ll never find Kevin” (125). He knows that Dana will accede to his demands in the hope that he will help her find her husband. However, he further controls Dana by actively preventing her from contacting Kevin (he hides the letters she writes instead of mailing them). By lying to Dana, Rufus obtains her obedience as she waits for word from her husband, as well as virtual ownership over her, a situation that is disrupted only when Alice reveals the letters hidden in Rufus’s bedroom. Dana’s love for her husband and her fear of never seeing him again allows her to better understand others’ suffering. She develops a deeper sympathy for Alice because, after she and her husband fail to escape, Isaac is sold to traders taking slaves to Mississippi. Rufus gains control of Alice through the sale—“Rufus had done exactly what I had said he would do: Gotten possession of the woman without having to bother with her husband”

(149). But Dana recognizes the depth of Alice's suffering when she and her own husband are reunited, for she realizes that Alice will never experience this outcome: "She was watching us—watching dry-eyed, but with more pain than I had ever seen on another person's face. My husband had come to me, finally. Hers would not be coming to her" (184). Rufus pushes Alice too far, however, when he makes her believe he has sold her children. After Alice attempts to escape, Rufus tries to control her through the threat of separation and sends the children to his mother in Baltimore "[t]o make her see what could happen . . . if she tried to leave me" (251). But Alice has suffered too much at Rufus's hands and hangs herself. Disgusted and angry, Dana accuses Rufus of murder, telling him: "You killed her. Just as though you had put [a] gun to her head and fired."

Similarly, Dana more fully sympathizes with others' experience of separation each time another person is sold. She is shocked to return to the plantation and find that Luke, a friend who works in the fields, had been sold because of his recalcitrant attitude. Dana is saddened by Luke's loss and surprised that his son Nigel hadn't run away, but Rufus points out that although Nigel had attempted to escape and been brought back, he is now married: "Man marries, has children, he's more likely to stay where he is" (139). As a slaveholder Rufus acknowledges that slaves develop emotional ties that create a strong impetus to stay in slavery, while also providing slaveholders with additional leverage to maintain control over them. This understanding gives her a new perspective about Sarah's apprehension of freedom talk (and the threat of discovery), allowing Dana to sympathize with her fear and find parallels between their situations: "He [Rufus] had already found the way to control me—by threatening others It was a lesson he had no doubt learned from his father. Tom Weylin, for instance, had known just how far to push Sarah. He had sold only three of her children—left her one to live for and protect" (169). In

addition to reminding each slave about personal vulnerability, each sale also reopens the wounds of past losses. When Sarah tells Dana to watch what she says, Dana realizes that Sarah is even more careful than she had been before: “Luke’s being sold must have frightened her badly. He used to be the one who hushed her” (150). And after Alice’s suicide, Sarah tells Dana that it was incredibly painful for her to take care of Alice while she mourned for the loss of her own children: “I didn’t want to even be close to her. When Marse Tom sold my babies, I just wanted to lay down and die. Seeing her like she was brought all that back” (250).

The physical abuse Dana experiences brings her closer to an understanding of how suffering impacted African Americans who lived under slavery. While the emotional suffering of others deeply troubles Dana, the physical experiences of her time in the nineteenth-century bring a new level of awareness: “Rufus’s time was a sharper, stronger reality. The work was harder, the smells and tastes were stronger, the danger was greater, the pain was worse Rufus’s time demanded things of me that had never been demanded before, and it could easily kill me if I did not meet its demands” (191). Although her first whipping sends her back to her own time, allowing her to escape briefly into the present-day, later abuses are not life-threatening. They do, however, cause her to question her assertion that she would be able to escape or resist abuses that she feels she would be unable to tolerate. Dana quickly loses the knives she carries back with her for protection and is unable to use them to defend herself because she hesitates to use violence against another human being—“Now I would be sold into slavery because I didn’t have the stomach to defend myself in the most effective way” (42)—or because she is easily disarmed. Although Dana constantly asks herself whether she has the strength and resolve to escape to freedom, each beating reduces her distance from the experience of being a slave and makes her feel the imposed limits on her agency.

Dana frequently thinks about returning home, and if she can't return home, escaping north, suggesting a strong parallel between the two. Regardless of her means of escape, Dana is in bondage and sees escape as the principal means of long-term survival, which is a primary reason why she questions other slaves' (seeming) acceptance of their subjugation. Dana is unsure whether she has the skills and fortitude to successfully achieve her goal and makes reference to such famous fugitive slaves as Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman who not only found freedom but published narratives about their experiences. Yet, while these exemplars became enshrined in American history, they do not tell the story of others who were unable to follow in their footsteps. Dana's attempt to run away teaches her that the narrative of escape is far more complex—and bound with suffering—than history and literature might convey. When Dana is caught running away from the plantation, she is surprised when Rufus tells her she will “get the cowhide . . . You know that” (176). She finds it difficult to accept that she will receive another whipping: “Somehow, I hadn't known. His gentleness had lulled me.” Dana is stripped naked and tied with her hands above her head, then whipped severely by Rufus's father. Although Dana tries to convince herself that she is dying in order to trigger a jump in time, she knows that it “was only punishment . . . Nigel had borne it. Alice had borne worse. Both were alive and healthy.” After the beating, Dana is in pain but also conflicted at the new fear she feels: “why was I so frightened now—frightened sick at the thought that sooner or later, I would have to run again?” (177). Dana knows that others have experienced such pain—or worse—and begins to recognize how physical abuse instills fear and circumscribes personal agency: “The pain of my body was enough for me to contend with. But now there was a question in my mind that had to be answered. Would I really try again? Could I? . . . See how easily slaves are made?”

Not long after Dana's beating, the overseer Edwards decides to make a show of his power and forces Dana to do the washing, labor for which she has not sufficiently recovered. Although Dana feebly protests, she quickly gives in to his demands because he threatens her with his lead-weighted whip: "I went out, God help me, and tried to do the wash. I couldn't face another beating so soon" (182). Some months later, Rufus sends Dana to the fields to punish her for something beyond her control—his father died of an illness and Dana could not save him. The labor itself is hot and exhausting; the field overseer whips Dana to force her to work more quickly, lashing her shoulders at random intervals: "He did that all day. Coming up suddenly, shouting at me, ordering me to go faster no matter how fast I went . . . he didn't hit me that often, but he kept me on edge because I never knew when a blow would fall. It got so just the sound of his coming terrified me" (213). Although Dana at first considered resisting, by the end of the day the constant pain of the work and the beatings overwhelms her: "After a while, it was more painful for me to push myself than it was for me to let Fowler hit me. After a while, I was so tired, I didn't care either way. Pain was pain. After a while, I just wanted to lie down between the rows and not get up again." Although Rufus shows remorse for Dana's treatment—he has her wounds treated and restores her to a household serving position—the threat of returning her to the fields is another form of control over her. When Rufus tries to make amends and she angrily turns to go, he tells her "You walk away from me, Dana, you'll be back in the fields in an hour!" (214). Stunned, Dana realizes his threat is real, that although they have a special bond, Rufus "meant it. He'd send me back out. I stood staring at him, not with anger now, but with surprise—and fear."

Dana's suffering—both physical and emotional—brings her so fully into the subject position of a slave that she worries she has lost her twentieth-century identity and become the

nineteenth-century slave. When Alice criticizes her for what she sees as an attitude that is too accommodating toward whites—"You run around fetching and carrying for that woman like you love her. And half a day in the fields was all it took" (200)—Dana worries that her suffering has made her too submissive, has taken the resistance out of her. She realizes that "[o]nce . . . I had worried that I was keeping too much distance between myself and this alien time. Now, there was no distance at all. When had I stopped acting? Why had I stopped?" (221). A short time later Dana discovers her friend Tess and two other slaves being sold and placed in a coffle: she is so distraught that she wonders if she should have let Rufus die after all. Carrie, however, comforts Dana by pointing out that her actions have the ability to impact all of the African Americans enslaved on the plantation—if Rufus dies, it is not just Dana's ancestral line that suffers. All of the slaves will be sold, which means families will be separated and perhaps sent to worse conditions. Although Dana has felt guilty for her feelings toward Rufus, forgiving his abuses and unable to hate him, she recognizes that her complicated relationship also impacts African Americans she cares about and that she is entangled in a complex relationship with both whites and blacks. When Dana mentions that she can "see why there are those here who think I'm more white than black," the mute Carrie gestures at Dana with an annoyed expression, wiping the side of Dana's face with her fingers (224). Nigel, Carrie's husband translates: "She means it doesn't come off, Dana The black. She means the devil with people who say you're anything but what you are." Dana is thus brought into sympathetic alignment with the enslaved people with whom she has developed deep affectional bonds in a way that acknowledges her as a member of this community and allows for the complexity of her position.

Science Fiction and Sentimental Appropriation: Making Readers “feel the book”

In an interview with Charles Rowell, Butler describes the origin of her idea for *Kindred*, relating an anecdote in which, during the Black Power Movement of the 1960s, she heard a young man giving remarks at Pasadena City College. The speaker said, “I’d like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long. But I can’t because I’d have to start with my own parents” (79). Butler was so struck by his statement that she “carried that comment . . . for thirty years,” believing that the young man “was still blaming [older generations of black people] for their humility and their acceptance of disgusting behavior on the part of employers and other people He felt so strongly ashamed of what the older generation had to do, without really putting it into the context of being necessary for not only their lives but his as well.” Butler’s goal, in *Kindred*, was to work against this shame and anger by teaching readers to feel sympathy for enslaved African Americans and their descendants. Butler’s intention not was not to create pity for previous generations’ suffering, but to demonstrate the ways in which their suffering and their survival required strength, enabling the survival of their descendants.

Like many neo-slave narrative authors, Butler drew from personal family history and historical accounts of the antebellum period to provide details for her narrative. Although *Kindred*, unlike *Jubilee*, does not attempt to recreate through fiction her mother’s or grandmother’s lives, Butler’s admiration for previous generations of African Americans and her interest in the relationship between contemporary and slave history was informed by her family heritage. Butler was raised by her mother, who spent her early childhood on a sugar plantation in Louisiana: “From what she’s told me of it, it wasn’t that far removed from slavery” (Kenan 496). Butler recalls that “My mother’s life and my grandmother’s life and the little bit I know of her ancestors’ lives were very hard and very terrible [Butler’s grandmother] chopped sugar

cane, and she also did the family laundry, not just her own family but the white family for whom they worked That was hard, physical labor” (Rowell 50). Butler also witnessed repeated racism against her mother who worked as a domestic servant: she was required to enter the back doors of houses and was spoken to “in ways that were obviously disrespectful” (51). Like the young college speaker, Butler at first was angry at her mother for accepting such treatment: “As a child I did not blame them for their disgusting behavior, but I blamed my mother for taking it. I didn’t really understand. This is something I carried with me for quite a while, as she entered back doors, and as she went deaf at appropriate times.” She came to realize that, however, that her mother’s actions not only enabled her own survival—“I ate because of what she did”—but also that her anger and shame were a common response:

I spent a lot of my childhood being ashamed of what she did, and I think one of the reasons I wrote *Kindred* was to resolve my feelings *Kindred* was a kind of reaction to some of the things going on during the sixties when people were feeling ashamed of, or more strongly, angry with their parents for not having improved things faster, and I wanted to take a person from today and send that person back to slavery. (Kenan 496)

In order to diffuse the anger for what young people perceive as a history of “accommodationist” behavior and to unburden present generations of the shame of a history of abuse, Butler had to find a way to develop sympathy between African Americans of the past and present. As a science fiction writer, her unique solution came through the narrative device of time travel. This plot device enabled Butler to force her protagonist—and her readers—to cross time and inhabit that perspective of the slave. In an interview with Nick DiChario for *Writers & Books*, Butler acknowledged that the methodology of *Kindred* “was to make people feel the book” (206). By “taking a modern day black person and making her experience slavery, not just as a matter of one-on-one but going back and being part of the whole system,” Butler provides readers with a protagonist who represents themselves, with whom they have much in common

and who would react as they would and feel as they would feel when placed in similar circumstances (207). Thus, readers share in feeling distance from the past as well as Dana's change in subject position, as the suffering she experiences moves them closer in sympathy for the enslaved. As Butler makes clear to her interviewer, she was not trying to make readers "understand what it felt like to be a slave," not attempting to present an anthropological or historical description of a past time period. Instead, she is attempting to "confront a modern person with that reality of history. It's one thing to read about it and cringe that something horrible is happening. I sent somebody into it who is a person of now, of today, and that means I kind of take the reader along and expose them in a way that the average historic novel doesn't intend to, can't." This confrontation both closes the distance between past and present and acknowledges that a persistent gap exists—Dana, after all, does return to 1970s California to live out the rest of her life. However, she is forever changed by having come into contact with her past.

It is clearly important that *Kindred's* readers learn to view African Americans of the past not only with sympathy but also with an understanding of their agency: survival in an extremely oppressive system *is* agency. Dana learns this lesson, discovering that enslaved African Americans have found multiple ways to resist and survive, despite the risks. Luke demonstrates a form of passive resistance, espousing the ideology that you "[d]on't argue with white folks . . . Don't tell them 'no' . . . Just say 'yes, sir.' Then go 'head and do what you want to do'" (96). He also shows that even passive resistance can have serious consequences when he is sold for his attitude. Similarly, when the slaves find out she can read and write, many of them ask Dana to teach them in secret, even though the penalties are severe if they are caught. *Kindred* also reveals that enslaved African Americans develop other methods of resistance, which largely have to do

with taking care of each other and protecting each other from further suffering. When Dana is forced to do the washing by the overseer but is not physically recovered to handle the labor, Alice insists on taking over and sends her back to the cookhouse. Worried about the consequences, Dana protests, but Alice declares, “[h]e knows where I sleep at night” (183). Although Alice’s relationship is coerced, she knows that she can use Rufus’s power against the abuses of other white men and can extend that protection to Dana. Sometimes, protecting each other means disciplining one of their group, as when the women beat up Liza, the sewing woman who reported Dana’s escape attempt. Liza refuses to tell on her attackers, claiming that her bruises and lost teeth are the result of a fall, and, as Alice tells Dana, “[s]he’ll keep her mouth shut next time We let her know what would happen to her if she didn’t. Now she’s more scared of us than of Mister Tom” (179).

Although Butler often found tales of resistance in slave narratives that belied the contemporary “whitewashing” that occurred at historical sites and downplayed the suffering of the enslaved, her preparatory research for writing *Kindred* taught her that she would need to push the boundaries of narrative in order to bring readers close to the experience of slavery:

one of the things I realized when I was reading the slave narrative . . . was that I was not going to be able to come anywhere near presenting slavery as it was. I was going to have to do a somewhat cleaned-up version of slavery, or no one would be willing to read it. I think that’s what most fiction writers do. They almost have to. (Kenan 497)

Butler sought to reach beyond historical fiction in order to present a narrative that did not pose a “version” of history so much as provide a vehicle for connecting contemporary readers to the past, to help them inhabit history while overcoming the disjuncture that occurs when one cannot comprehend another’s suffering. Butler was able to exploit this disjuncture to her advantage, drawing from the conventions of science fiction to create a space in which readers would accept the combination of multiple realities. As a genre, science fiction is generally focused on the

future, not the past, so it is a startling choice to combine it with the historical genre of the slave narrative. Of course, Butler has always insisted that *Kindred* is more a fantasy than a science fiction text since the operations of the time travel aren't a focus of the novel, but the semantics may be largely irrelevant. *Kindred*, like most science fiction, offers "zones of possibility" because it bends, alters, or rewrites accepted rules of reality; science fiction is a literature where "almost any formulaic deformations are possible" (Landon 17). Incorporating time travel into the neo-slave narrative allows Butler to make slavery "possible" for contemporary readers. Whereas historical fiction acknowledges that its narrative events happen in the past and allows readers emotional distance from the events described, Butler's combination of genres actually thrusts the issue of slavery forward, into the present, allowing her to collapse the emotional distance for readers.

Beverly Friend reads the conclusion of *Kindred* as a failed commentary on women's agency, arguing that its overall message is that "contemporary woman is not educated to survive, that she is as helpless, perhaps even more helpless, than her predecessors Men understand how the world is run; women do not. Victims then, victims now" (55). Elizabeth Beaulieu, however, argues against this "pessimistic feminist reading," citing Dana's trip to Maryland with Kevin after she has healed (130). Dana looks up records of what happened to the enslaved men and women on the Weylin plantation after she killed Rufus and disappeared, finding sales records for many of them, which deeply saddens her. Beaulieu points out that while Dana questions why she wanted to return to Maryland, where "slavery had touched her—firsthand," Kevin reminds her that "[y]ou probably needed to come for the same reason I did To try to understand. To touch solid evidence that those people existed" (Beaulieu 130; Butler 264). Dana could not save the people she cared for, and her actions caused more suffering for them since

killing their master resulted in the sale of his slaves, but Dana's affectional connection allows her to draw a direct line between their lives and her own. And this is much of Butler's moral imperative: that modern-day African Americans should acknowledge the suffering as well as the strengths experienced by their predecessors, which contribute to their own abilities to survive. As Beaulieu points out, "Dana finally accomplishes the difficult task of individuating herself as a black woman in twentieth-century America, discovering a sense of personal history and developing a more intimate relationship with the black ancestors to whom she owes her existence" (130). Dana develops this intimate relationship through shared suffering, and it is through readers' sympathy with that suffering that a sense of understanding and historical re-connection is established.

CHAPTER 7

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: "Feeling how it must have felt to her mother"

*I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms
all my children could get in between
. . . there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to.*
—Morrison, *Beloved* (162)

Stanley Crouch, in his scathing 1987 review of *Beloved*, angrily accuses Toni Morrison of writing melodramatic sentimental fiction that is “designed to placate sentimental feminist ideology,” making sure that “the vision of black woman as the most scorned and rebuked of the victims doesn’t weaken” (67). Equally offensive to this critic is that he believes Morrison “lacks a true sense of the tragic,” and he criticizes the author for what he feels is a lack of realistic and complicating detail about experiences of slavery, such as African participation in the slave trade. Thus, Crouch asserts, Morrison “only asks that her readers tally up the sins committed against the darker people and feel sorry for them, not experience the horrors of slavery as they do.” While he praises Morrison’s musical structure and her deft use of images, he criticizes her “maudlin ideological commercials” and deems the text largely “portentous melodrama” (68, 71). Asserting that *Beloved*’s primary flaw as a novel is that it does not “transcend race” in order to focus upon the larger concerns of the human condition, he continues, “*Beloved* fails to rise to tragedy because it shows no sense of the timeless and unpredictable manifestations of evil that preceded and followed American slavery, of the gruesome ditches in the human spirit that prefigure all injustice” (71, 68).

This critic’s accusations are strikingly familiar. Echoing the criticisms of realists and

modernists who accuse sentimentalism of being unable to portray both real experience and true feeling, Crouch describes *Beloved* as suffering “from the failure of feeling that is sentimentality” (69). And yet, this criticism seems oxymoronic because of sentimentality’s very claims upon feeling. Morrison’s critic argues that it is not enough for her to write a text that causes readers to “feel sorry” for those who experienced slavery but that the novel must cause readers to “*experience* the horrors of slavery.” And yet, one might argue, that is exactly sentimentalism’s aim: to cause the reader to sympathize with the plight of enslaved persons, to feel what they are feeling in order to come to sympathy with them. If feeling, according to Crouch and critics like him, is a failure of realism, one might ask, how is a text that attempts to portray extreme suffering to do so “realistically”? When the experience of slavery is so horrific as to have traumatized generations of families; to have perpetuated countless rapes, physical assaults, and murders; to have resulted in a war, decades of racial violence, social and economic oppression, and cultural beliefs that are based in centuries-old racial stereotypes; how is a text to make a contemporary reader, more than one hundred years removed, “experience the horrors of slavery”?

Rebecca Wanzo, in *This Suffering Will Not Be Televised*, asks a key question confronting writers who seek to portray suffering, “particularly black writers who represent the history of black struggle: how do you represent suffering in a way that people will not dismiss as sentimental?” (95). Many novels that attempt to represent slavery have often been criticized for being melodramatic or sentimental, and Wanzo cites a John Updike review of Tom Wolfe’s novel *A Man in Full* (1998) in which he praises the white author’s “attempt at the great black novel without ‘the usual mooning about slavery.’” What Crouch comes close to arguing, and what Wanzo suggests is the challenge for authors who wish to write about slavery and suffering,

is that

the mere existence of the representation is sentimental . . . representations of suffering that are not ironic, minimalist in their representation, and that represent women are always vulnerable to being accused of sentimentality. Representing tears, inviting sympathy from the reader, inviting identification or self-examination in relationship to a representation of pain--any of these is routinely read as sentimental. (96)

The caveat that “good literature” must “transcend race,” suggests a perspective of hegemonic privilege, one that assumes that the human condition is both raceless and un-gendered, represented accurately only by the white male writer. When critics like Updike praise novels by suggesting that they “transcend race,” they indicate that such texts are “closer to ‘reality,’ a reality that is far from sentimental and feminist readings of racial and gendered injustice” (95). As Wanzo rightly points out, these critics do not offer a clear definition of what “good” African American literature is, but they are clear that it should not contain portrayals of excessive suffering. Such writing should demonstrate the ways in which “black people have some responsibility for their suffering.” It should not “focus on violence against black women” and should not “treat black people as victims or as suffering from ‘cruel determinism’” (97). To write about specific forms of suffering in gendered and raced bodies and to write about the conditions which bring about the suffering of those bodies calls into question the ideologies that undergird beliefs about a universal subjectivity represented by male whiteness.

In retrospect, then, it should be clear that when women began to write sentimental fiction, they placed themselves at the center of a new social order that valued female subjectivity and argued for the recognition of women as valuable cultural subjects. However, women who wrote nineteenth-century sentimental fiction tended to be white, Protestant, and middle-class. As African American authors began to tackle the ways in which human identity was constructed as white, they wrote narratives that argued first for black humanity—because cultural definitions

designated citizens as white and persons with black skin as chattel/property—and later for their gender identities—African American men sought to prove they were just as much “men” as white men by acquiring literacy, property, and the respect of their communities while African American women showed the ways in which they met the definitions of white “womanhood” while simultaneously being prevented from doing so because of their social conditions.

In the twentieth century, Morrison continues the sentimental critiques of many nineteenth-century African American women’s slave narratives in her neo-slave narrative *Beloved*, which was published in 1987, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988, and has become, arguably, one of the most discussed novels in contemporary literature. Despite Crouch’s assertions about the “failures” of feeling within the text, Morrison’s *Beloved*, like Jacobs’s *Incidents* or Wilson’s *Our Nig*, adopts the style of sentimental fiction in order to capitalize on familiar cultural tropes and reader sympathy while simultaneously critiquing the racial and gender ideologies embedded in sentimental narrative. However, as a contemporary author, Morrison not only uses the forms of sentimental fiction to increase sympathy for her seemingly un-sympathetic protagonist—a mother who murders her own child—and to capture reader sympathy for the past suffering experienced by millions of enslaved persons, but she also incorporates critiques of sentimentality. Those criticisms enable Morrison to present African American slave history as a form of trauma with a living legacy and to reveal that contemporary views of African American identity are shaped by a cultural history that is deeply informed by our shared history of slavery as well as suffering itself. In this postmodern neo-slave narrative, Morrison appropriates the real-life historical narrative of Margaret Garner’s tragic story, as well as of sentimental fiction and nineteenth-century slave narratives, in order to comment upon a history of suffering as well as the ways in which cultural views of sympathy and suffering

contribute to ongoing racial and gender ideologies.

Although Morrison's novel explores multiple forms of trauma created by the experience of slavery, one of the most recognizable sentimental tropes in *Beloved* is the separation of families and the development of kinship communities that extend beyond blood ties. This theme is integral to Stowe's anti-slavery argument: the loss of family is a form of suffering that is presented again and again in slave narratives throughout the nineteenth-century. The prevalence of this theme in *Beloved* is both appropriate because Morrison's novel focuses upon a family and a community heavily traumatized by the abuses of slavery, of which separation and loss of family was common, and ironic because the text's protagonist is a mother who murders her own child. Morrison's central character Sethe—the fictional counterpart to the real-life Margaret Garner, who also killed her child when faced with a return to slavery—could be viewed as utterly unsympathetic in the eyes of a reading public that deems motherhood an essential aspect to womanhood. Both in Margaret Garner's time and in Morrison's twentieth-century—a culture that remains heavily influenced by the legacy of sentimentalism's gender roles—women are placed at the moral center of the family: their highest priority is considered to be the love, care, and protection of their children. For Sethe to kill one of her children is a violation of all that makes her a mother and a woman in the eyes of a culture that holds the mother-child relationship sacrosanct. In fact, during the nineteenth-century, pro-slavery arguments often pointed to enslaved women's lack of mother-child relationships as evidence of their lack of humanity, neglecting to acknowledge that such ties were often severed through sale or that women were unable to care for their children because they were forced to labor in fields or service while children were supervised by a designated caregiver. For Morrison to write a neo-slave narrative that violates the mother-child relationship so obviously is to risk alienating her readers'

sympathies and reinforcing such stereotypes. Working against the murder, however, is a narrative of maternal love that seeks to reclaim African American motherhood and familial structures. Morrison shows that Sethe kills her daughter out of love and the desire to protect, connecting this extreme response to the suffering experienced by every member of her family and community. This perspective calls attention to the maternal and familial ideology inherent in sentimentalism, as well as assumptions about selfhood, race, and class which are foundational to that ideology. As even members of Sethe's community struggle with her actions—both before and after she commits the murder—the novel provides a meditation on suffering itself, revealing layers of pain within a traumatized community and questioning the effectiveness of sympathy as an affective tool. Inviting the reader to consider the nature of sympathy, love, and affective connection, Morrison asks readers how much suffering is *required* in order to receive sympathy, and whether overcoming or healing from suffering comes at the cost of sympathy.

Challenging the Universal: Maternal Love, Loss, and Selfhood

Critics have extensively discussed maternal love as a significant theme in *Beloved*, noting the ways in which Morrison's presentation of Sethe's "too thick love" (165) dramatizes the psychological struggles of identity that motherhood in slavery entails. Critics have examined the psychological and cultural meaning of Morrison's presentation of motherhood in the novel from a variety of positions. Barbara Offutt Mathieson offers a psychoanalytic analysis of the novel, in which she delineates the stages of child development and argues, through an examination of Sethe's psychological scars, that there is a correspondence between memory and maternal love. Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos reads the novel through Jung, examining the "dark and painful side of mothering, the fact that mothering can extinguish the developing self of the mother,

sometimes even before that individuation can really begin” (51). After reviewing the extent to which “Sethe’s maternal bonds almost destroy her,” Demetrakopoulos concludes that Sethe is denied “normal motherhood by the culture that envelops her” which causes her to carry “mother instinct to an absurd and grotesque length” and eventually requires “the death of the maternal” in order for her whole self to live (55, 58). Meanwhile, Jean Wyatt offers a Lacanian analysis, examining the discursive position of the maternal symbolic, interpreting Morrison’s use of language and metaphor and arguing that the novel “reconstructs the acts of maternal heroism as the reproductive feats of the maternal body” (213). Such heroism appears as an alternative to the system of master definition, a patriarchal symbolic order. Colleen Carpenter Cullinan examines the Christian tradition that links motherhood and redemption, “or more specifically, speaks of the maternity of Christ,” in order to discuss the “discourse of redemption voiced by the mothers of *Beloved*” and the ways that maternal voices respond to suffering and sin (78).

While these readings offer insightful ways to understand the significant symbolic place motherhood holds in both American culture and in *Beloved*, another context in which to understand Morrison’s attention to maternal care is its ability to convey a universalized sense of suffering. In order to extend sympathy across social boundaries, sentimental novels often focus on experiences that are thought to be universal, such as death, the loss of a child, or separation from family. Sentimental novels frequently focus upon the severing of ties between parent and child. Such fiction is rife with orphans who are made vulnerable to the horrors of the world by the loss of a parent—such as Gerty and Ellen Montgomery—as well as parents who suffer over the loss of their children—such as Ruth Hall and Eliza. Both Lauren Berlant and Rebecca Wanzo, drawing from Adam Smith, have discussed the philosophy of liberalism that underpins Enlightenment sensibility which argues for the “naturalness and universal nature of sympathy”

but has also been criticized for a universality that is based in a white, westernized, masculine subjectivity that does not acknowledge limits on agency (Wanzo 23, 20-21). Although critical of the use of “conventions and clichés as placeholders for the universal,” Berlant points out that nineteenth-century American sentimental writers “generate an affective and intimate public sphere that . . . sanctifies suffering as a relay to universality in a way that includes women in the universal” (12). In order to cross the racial divide that excluded enslaved African American women from this affective, feminine sphere, Stowe focused upon the universality of losing a child. Wanzo contends that the slave mother’s experience “of her child being sold into slavery would not be the same as a white woman’s suffering in the face of the death of her free white child. The two events would not evoke the same feelings. Nonetheless, Stowe uses this homogenization of suffering to encourage empathy” (25). Because white female readers could understand the horror of losing a child, they would sympathize with Eliza’s plight as a mother and a woman.

Just as Berlant is critical of sentimental stereotypes and clichés, Wanzo points out that such an assumption of universal suffering “comes at the cost of dehumanizing other black women.” By ignoring the real ways in which being sold into slavery is not the same as death and by refusing (or being unable) to acknowledge the differences in their suffering, nineteenth-century sentimental novelists privilege white suffering and white identity. Stowe’s novel recognizes that African American women are mothers and are women who suffer, “but their suffering is not framed as resembling the suffering of the imagined ideal white reader. Rather, their pain is presented as suffering that should be prevented by people who have Christian compassion for others.” Such differences are what led to a preference in race-themed sentimental texts for light-skinned mulatto heroines, protagonists who more closely resemble the ideal white

reader, resulting in a colorism that maintains connections between whiteness and strong moral character. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been extremely influential, and while not alone in privileging whiteness, its legacy “has haunted numerous African American women who are viewed as far from white feminine ideals when they try to illustrate that they should receive sympathy” (26).

Sethe, then, is a deliberately problematic sentimental protagonist, simultaneously drawing from and disrupting traditional narratives of maternal loss and suffering. Morrison positions Sethe to receive sympathy through accepted beliefs about universal suffering through her love of her children, her fear of losing them, and her pain over the loss of her daughter. However, Morrison also positions Sethe to challenge assumptions regarding universal suffering because, as a fugitive slave, Sethe's circumstances are unique and utterly unavailable to the modern reader. Readers are constantly reminded of Sethe's non-idealized body—her skin is dark and heavily scarred—and she crosses acceptable social barriers by killing her own child. Sethe's suffering is not framed as the same as or equal to that of the “imagined ideal white reader” but instead challenges readers to sympathize with her pain while recognizing the vast differences that exist between them. By engaging the African American community of the text in a confrontation with their own beliefs about suffering—who deserves sympathy for their suffering, comparisons of suffering, and whether one continues to deserve sympathy if suffering ceases—Morrison demonstrates that suffering is both universal and individualized, that a sympathy based only on perceived similarity and universality (and doesn't allow for difference) is limited and ineffective. However, if sympathy with acknowledgment for difference is achieved, it can provide opportunities for healing.

In the moments leading up to and during Sethe's attempt to kill her children—resulting in the death of only one—she isn't angry or sadistic. These are not the actions of a depraved or

indifferent mother. Instead, Morrison makes clear that Sethe loves her children even more than herself, connecting her escape and her act of violence to her love and her desire to protect her children from the horrors she experienced in slavery. Sethe's love is an act of rebellion against a system that actively works to inhibit all affective and familial relationships for African Americans, particularly that of mother-child. Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, exemplifies this experience. She bore eight children to six fathers, and all of her life, "men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen, or seized What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces were her children" (23). After two daughters are sold before she even knew they were gone and after sleeping with a straw boss in exchange for keeping a son who is sold anyway, Baby Suggs becomes pregnant again but finds it too painful to love children that are repeatedly taken from her: "That child she could not love and the rest she would not."

Sethe was kept on the same plantation as her mother, but they did not have a relationship because her mother was forced to work while Sethe was raised by another woman: "I didn't see her but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo" (60). Later, when her mother is hanged for some unknown offense, an enslaved woman named Nan tells Sethe that she was the only child her mother had chosen to keep—she "threw away" the babies conceived out of rape—and that she had named her for the black man she had chosen to love: "The others she did not put her arms around. Never" (62). Sethe struggles to interpret these acts as signs of her mother's love, and she questions her mother's feelings for her, wondering if she had been hanged because she had been caught escaping and had left her daughter behind: "No. Not that.

Because she was my ma'am and nobody's ma'am would run off and leave her daughter, would she? . . . Even if she hadn't been able to suckle the daughter for more than a week or two and had to turn her over to another woman's tit that never had enough for all" (203). Knowing the emotional costs of motherhood in slavery, Paul D worries about Sethe's attachment to her children, believing that disconnection is the only way to protect the self from additional harm: "The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one" (45).

Sethe, however, rejects the idea that one can protect the self or alleviate suffering by withholding. While Paul D replaces his heart with a rusted "tobacco tin" in order to survive brutalities, losses, and disillusionments, Sethe conflates her identity as a mother with her selfhood, both of which require freedom and agency. Like Walker's Vyry in *Jubilee*, Morrison's Sethe cannot contemplate escaping Sweet Home without her children. The act of fleeing is both a protective act for her children and a declaration of selfhood:

I did it. I got us all out . . . Each and every one of my babies and me too. I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn't no accident. I did that. I had help, of course, lots of that, but still it was me doing it; me saying, Go on, and Now. Me having to look out. Me using my own head. But it was more than that. It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right. (162)

A modern reader would have a hard time interpreting Sethe's actions as selfish because she saved her children from slavery and risked herself in the process. But her actions could be construed as selfish by her contemporaries because to love her children was a fundamentally selfish act. To save her children is to save herself, both because it defies a system that denies African American motherhood and because it was her first claim of ownership to her freed self. Claiming affective bonds is a method of claiming the self, and those bonds are strongest with

family, the relationships that are most assiduously denied by the system of slavery. In the twenty-eight day period after her escape, Sethe bonded with the free black Ohio community and participated in “Days of healing, ease and real-talk . . . feeling their fun and sorrow along with her own” (95). Developing these affective bonds allows Sethe, “along with the others,” to claim herself because “Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another.” The act of loving and feeling sympathy toward others are acts of selfishness because they require a sense of *self*.

Milk-Love: Reclaiming Body, Self, and Familial Relationships

The connection between Sethe’s suffering, her love for her children, and her desire to prevent their suffering is exemplified in repeated references to her mother’s milk. Sethe connects her ability to nurse her children both literally and metaphorically with her role as their caretaker and mother—a role which is impossible if one is prevented from possessing one’s body and selfhood. When she is sexually assaulted by schoolteacher’s nephews at Sweet Home, boys who hold her down and drink the milk from her breasts, the violation is both physical and psychological because of the trauma it induces and its participation in a history of separating enslaved women from their children, not just through sale, but also by severing their emotional relationships and treating the women as chattel. The preservation of Sethe’s milk is symbolically the ownership of her own body and her exclusive relationship to her children:

Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children. I never had to give it to nobody else—and the one time I did it was took from me—they held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby. Nan had to nurse whitebabies and me too because Ma’am was in the rice. The little whitebabies first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left . . . they handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses. (200)

When Sethe recalls the abuses she suffered at Sweet Home, she repeatedly points to the mammary rape as the worst assault perpetrated against her. Although Paul D is mortified that Schoolteacher whipped Sethe, she repeatedly interjects, “And they took my milk!” (17). Thus, during her escape, Sethe focuses on bringing her milk to her children because she needs to provide actual nourishment for her nursing baby and because it symbolizes the unique relationship only she, as their mother, has with them: “All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn’t know it. Nobody knew that she couldn’t pass her air if you held her up on your shoulder, only if she was lying on my knees. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me” (16). Sethe’s need to reunite with her children motivates her to survive the horrors of the final days at Sweet Home and the extreme hardship of her escape: “What I had to get through later I got through because of you. Passed right by those boys hanging in the trees. One had Paul A’s shirt on but not his feet or his head. I walked right on by because only me had your milk, and God do what He would, I was going to get it to you” (198).

Milk becomes a metaphor for Sethe’s ability to love and designate who is a member of her family. Sethe seeks to remind Beloved, after coming to believe she is her daughter, that when she arrived in Ohio, exhausted, with her back torn from the whipping at Sweet Home, and having given birth to Denver on the way: “You remember that, don’t you That when I got here I had milk enough for all?” Although Sethe had two older boys who were too old to nurse and needed only to have enough milk for the newborn Denver and the infant “crawling-already?” daughter, the ambiguity of the indefinite pronoun “all” (in lieu of “both”) suggests that she includes all of her children. As Sethe comes to recognize Beloved as her daughter, returned in human form, she begins to associate her with milk. When Beloved kisses her neck in the clearing

after the mysterious choking incident, Sethe separates herself from Beloved and “later believed that it was because the girl’s breath was exactly like new milk” (98). The milk smell on Beloved’s breath connotes nursing, linking Beloved to the dead infant and re-incorporating her into Sethe’s family circle. Poetic segments that hint at both Beloved’s stream-of-conscious memories and conversations with Sethe show that—after becoming convinced that Beloved is her daughter—Sethe asks her to remember the milk, to remember being included in this circle of familial love:

You rememory me?
Yes. I remember you.
You never forgot me?
Your face is mine.
* * *

I have your milk
I have your smile
I will take care of you

You are my face; I am you. Why did you leave me who am you?
I will never leave you again
Don’t ever leave me again
You will never leave me again
You went in the water
I drank your blood
I brought your milk
* * *

I waited for you
You are mine
You are mine
You are mine (215-16)

Sethe identifies herself to Beloved as the one who has her milk and shares her face—imagistic representations of motherhood—and, therefore, is the one who protects and cares for her.

Because of the narrative fragmentation, “I drank your blood” suggests that Denver is included in the circle of relationships, but Sethe metaphorically drank Beloved’s blood by cutting her throat. By declaring that she “brought your milk,” Sethe reasserts her role as life- and love-giver, the

one who designates family bonds. Thus, “you are mine” is ambiguous as both Beloved and Sethe claim ownership of each other.

Much like she does with her older children, however, Sethe does not limit the metaphor of milk-love to literal nursing, nor does it indicate only which children are part of her family. She expands the idea of having “enough milk” as a metaphor of inclusion, designating Paul D as part of her familial circle as well. When Sethe chooses to include Paul D as part of her family, she associates her decision “to launch her newer, stronger life with a tender man” with her mother’s milk (99). When she enters the house thinking about the special meal she plans to make for Paul D, she finds him bathing in a tub in the kitchen. As he pulls her against his wet, naked body, the talk about her cooking becomes foreplay, and Sethe thinks, “There was no question but she could do it. Just like the day she arrived at 124—sure enough, she had milk enough for all” (100). With her children long grown, Sethe is not physically nursing or producing milk; instead, having enough milk is metaphor for her choice to extend her love to him and designate him as a member of her family.

Sethe’s milk-love allows her to reconstruct her familial and affectional bonds in opposition to destructive societal pressures under slavery, reclaiming her body and placing the African American mother at the center of the African American family. What is interesting about this construction of family is its combination of both consanguinity, to use Cindy Weinstein’s term, and affective choice. What *Beloved* shares with sentimental fiction is a focus on the construction of the family. Weinstein, in *Family, Kinship, and Sympathy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, argues that the primary task of sentimental literature is to redefine the family “as an institution to which one can choose to belong or not” (8). Nineteenth-century sentimental fiction constitutes an “interrogation and reconfiguration of what constitutes a family

. . . replacing it with a family that is based on affection and organized according to a paradigm of contract,” by which Weinstein generally means adoption or marriage (9). Sentimental fiction challenges the consanguineous relations—or blood ties—that bind biological families together.

Although the novels promote mother love as an antidote to paternal failure, children in sentimental fiction are often left motherless, which “demands that the possibilities for who counts as family be expanded. In the process, the criterion by which families are deemed capable (or not) to raise a child shifts from considerations of economy to those of affection. Sentimental fictions are about finding the right place where sympathy flourishes and understanding that place and those people as one’s home and ‘family.’” Sentimental literature, however, focuses on middle-class white families where the ties of consanguinity are socially and legally validated; altering that family structure becomes a way to reorganize national social structures and emphasize affection as a new hegemonic moral and familial order. As an enslaved African American woman, Sethe’s consanguineous ties to her children are neither socially nor legally recognized. Furthermore, African American women’s affective ties to their children have traditionally been ignored. Rather than focusing on a child left vulnerable and needing to expand the definition of family by affective bonds, *Beloved* focuses on a mother who as a child was made vulnerable by the system of slavery that denies all ties of biology and affection and who then demands recognition for that relationship by rescuing her own children. Thus, Sethe’s combination of both the physical and emotional—milk and love—reclaims both African American consanguineous family structures as well as the sentimental affective process that legitimizes a mother’s role in determining the structure of the family.

The Demands of Sympathy: Suffering as a Reflection of the Self

Sethe attempts to kill her children, succeeding only in killing her daughter, because she is protecting them from the abuses and dehumanization that she knows they will experience under slavery and because she is refusing to relinquish her familial rights to schoolteacher's control. When she recognizes the hat of her former master, "She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them" (163). As James Berger has pointed out, this reference to the veil evokes W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, in which the veil is a metaphor for both American racial separation and African American double consciousness. Berger interprets this moment as an apocalyptic revelation of "continuing white racism and of African American self-destruction" (410). However, one must also consider Du Bois's connection between double consciousness and selfhood. In *Souls*, Du Bois writes that African Americans are "born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world," can achieve "no true self-consciousness" but can only "see himself through the revelation of the other [i.e., white] world" (364). Sethe claims herself through her escape, through her children, and through her sympathetic connections with African American community members during her month of freedom. Her desire to push her children "through the veil" can be read as the wish to place them firmly in a consciousness where selfhood is not determined in relation to white consciousness or the white world. Although violent, her act is not so much self-destructive as it is radically rebellious and protective. Because the white world is dominant—everything and everyone is defined through or against white norms—Sethe's reality demands that African Americans maintain double-consciousness, and only death will free her and her children from defining themselves in this divided manner, from existing as "Others."

Although Paul D protests that what she did was wrong and points to the aftermath of her actions, she declares, “I stopped him. I took and put my babies where they’d be safe They ain’t at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain’t got em” (162-63). Regardless of the costs and the judgment of her community, Sethe maintains that her actions were protective. Although only her daughter died, Sethe’s actions prevented all of her children from returning to slavery; they were allowed to remain within the African American community and claim a greater chance for self-definition.

In drawing this bloody line, Sethe’s actions render her unsympathetic and incomprehensible both to the white and African American communities. When schoolteacher enters the woodshed and sees what she has done, he realizes “that there was nothing there to claim,” comparing her to a mishandled horse or hound “if you beat it beyond the point of education” (149). Schoolteacher’s statements are highly ironic. Throughout the narrative, his assessments of Sethe’s and other slave’s bodies or “characteristics” have degraded and dehumanized them. Schoolteacher works against Mr. Garner’s assertion that the slaves are men and women, classifying them as more animal than human. Such treatment creates a crisis of conscience that causes Paul D to despair over his manhood and Sethe to go to violent extremes to save her children. And yet, schoolteacher views her act as proof of a complete lack of humanity—there is “nothing there to claim” because he sees a mother’s murdering her children as evidence that all of her humanity has evaporated. What he doesn’t recognize is that he sought to reclaim ownership of a woman, not a beast, one who “made fine ink, damn good soup, pressed his collars the way he liked.” But what schoolteacher and his nephews find is a woman who has violated what a socially defined woman should hold sacrosanct—she has killed her own children—leaving them too stunned to understand her motivations, asking repeatedly, “What she go and do that for?” (150). As they leave, the men avoid the eyes of the community members

who have gathered, feeling disturbed by all the “nigger eyes” and recalling the children’s staring eyes in the sawdust. Children—even “nigger” children that they prefer to view as property or animals—invoke a sympathetic response in these men that they wish to ignore. They are particularly troubled by Sethe’s eyes because it “looked like she didn’t have any. Since the whites in them had disappeared and since they were black as her skin, she looked blind.” Sethe’s eyes evoke another animalistic image because many animals—such as horses and dogs—don’t show the whites, but the image also gives the impression that she is possessed or overcome by something unnatural.

Schoolteacher and his nephews are not the only ones disturbed by Sethe’s eyes. When Paul D reunites with Sethe, he recognizes her face despite the passage of eighteen years, recalling that the irises of her eyes are “the same color of her skin, which, in that still face, used to make him think of a mask with mercifully punched-out eyes” (9). The violence of this image—the term “punched-out” generally refers to a mechanized process that creates holes in a shape to indicate eyes, but the use of “punched” also connotes the violence of a physical blow—suggests that Sethe’s eyes reflect a sadness or suffering that has resulted from her experiences. However, the “punched-out eyes” can also suggest blindness, that the eyes have been removed, and Paul D seems to find this “merciful” because it is a way to protect Sethe from witnessing or experiencing things that would hurt her further.²⁹ Eyes are often metaphorically viewed as windows to the soul—a way to glimpse a person’s interiority—and as mirrors—a person can view himself reflected in another’s eyes. It may be merciful for Paul D not to see himself in Sethe’s eyes because they confront him with their shared suffering as well as suffering he cannot

²⁹ Indeed, the danger of witnessing is exemplified through Halle, who hides in the hayloft while schoolteacher’s nephews assault his wife. Unable to reveal himself and knowing that he could do nothing to stop the abuse, Halle is forced to watch his wife’s mammary rape. The trauma of this event breaks him, and Paul D later finds him babbling incoherently, with butter slathered over his face.

understand. Sitting by a fire at Sweet Home, telling Paul D that her children had been sent North and of her own plans to run, “her eyes did not pick up a flicker of light. They were like two wells into which he had trouble gazing. Even punched out they needed to be covered, lidded, marked with some sign to warn folks of what that emptiness held.” Sethe’s eyes are disturbingly empty because others see only emptiness: they do not see themselves reflected back.

This affirmation of suffering—a sympathy that depends on identification with the sufferer in a way that reflects one’s own experience—is precisely what this African American community struggles with throughout the novel. Even prior to the killing, Morrison points to problems of sympathy that inhibit the community from overcoming or healing from their traumatic past. Although the novel does not advocate forgetting the past—as its emphasis on “rememory” and the return of Beloved attest—the novel emphasizes that the ongoing suffering of those who have experienced trauma must be acknowledged and addressed in order for healing to occur. Even more important than *why* Sethe killed her daughter, is the effect it has on her community and its capacity to extend sympathy to her despite their inability to understand her choice. *Beloved*’s concern is less with how a mother can kill her daughter—because, as Morrison points out, this happened more frequently than contemporary readers realize because women with no other options were desperate to free their children from slavery³⁰—than with questions about whether a community can extend sympathy to those who have suffered *differently from them* and facilitate healing. Focusing on a catalog of hurts and asking whether one individual or group suffered more or less than others, actually magnifies isolation and suffering and does not

³⁰ In “Rediscovering Black History,” Morrison describes the experience of gathering materials for what eventually became *The Black Book* (1974): it was “as though I were experiencing once again the barbarity visited upon my people as I sat in Spike Harris’s apartment reading 17th-century through 19th-century newspapers with a magnifying glass.” She came across a clipping from 1854 titled “A Visit to the Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child,” which described the Margaret Garner case that eventually became the foundation for *Beloved*. Morrison noted, “Such accounts jammed the pages of early American newspapers.”

allow for a true recognition of pain or the costs of that suffering.

Paul D breaches Sethe's isolation and becomes someone who shares her grief, but his ability to sympathize with Sethe is sorely tested when he is confronted with the story of her violent actions. After their reunion, Paul D and Sethe share their stories of Sweet Home—to Denver's irritation—and find comfort in their common past because it enables them to sympathize more fully with each other's pain. After telling the story of her assault, whipping, and escape, Paul D comforts Sethe by standing behind her, tracing the "chokecherry tree" of scars on her back, and cupping her breasts in his hands: "Behind her, bending down, his body an arc of kindness, he held her breasts in the palms of his hands. He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches" (17). In addition to listening to her story, Paul D's physical contact allows him to come closer to her sorrow, bringing him in greater sympathy with Sethe to provide her comfort. His sympathy causes Sethe to wonder if she could

just stand there a minute or two, naked from shoulder blade to waist, relieved of the weight of her breasts, smelling the stolen milk again and the pleasure of baking bread? Maybe this one time she could stop . . . and feel the hurt her back ought to. Trust things and remember things because the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank? (18)

As a Sweet Home man, Paul D understands her past experiences; by temporarily taking the burdens of those sexual/maternal memories and supporting her through her pain, he demonstrates that he shares her suffering. Sethe believes that Paul D is "someone to share [her grief]," making up for the loss of the friends in the community who had turned away from her years ago (96).

However, Paul D cannot sympathize with or accept Sethe when he learns that she obtained her family's freedom by killing one of her children. After loving and sympathizing with her, Paul D experiences a process of physical and emotional displacement that distances him

from Sethe. When Stamp Paid shows Paul D a newspaper clipping and tells him what happened, he at first insists that the story isn't about Sethe because he doesn't recognize her face in the picture: he repeatedly asserts "That ain't her mouth" (156). However, he sees Sethe in the drawing's eyes noticing that they are "almost as calm as hers," and in the woman's posture, noting that her head "was turned on her neck in the manner he loved so well." Denying the news because he wants to love her, Paul D refuses to acknowledge the face as Sethe's because he knows that African Americans appear in newspapers only when the news about them is terrible, "something out of the ordinary—something whitepeople would find interesting, truly different." He is afraid that what he will learn about Sethe will make her unrecognizable and unsympathetic to him. Indeed, when he goes to Sethe and shows her the clipping, he begins to feel disoriented as she circles the room and explains: "It made him dizzy . . . listening to her was like having a child whisper into your ear so close you could feel its lips form the words you couldn't make out because they were too close" (157). Paul D finds her words incomprehensible and discovers that he can't follow her story from their shared past at Sweet Home to her desperate act in Ohio.

When Sethe expresses being unable to fully love while enslaved, Paul D believes he understands, relating her suffering to his own experiences as a prisoner where the men learned that "you protected yourself and loved small A woman, a child, a brother—a big love like that would split you wide open in Alfred, Georgia. He knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well now, *that* was freedom." However, when Sethe describes gathering her children, putting her babes "where they'd be safe," Paul D feels a "roaring" in his head and finds her unrecognizable from the woman he had known at Sweet Home:

The prickly, mean-eyed Sweet Home girl he knew as Halle's girl was obedient (like Halle), shy (like Halle), and work-crazy (like Halle) This here Sethe was new

This here Sethe talked about love like any other woman; talked about baby clothes like any other woman, but what she meant could cleave the bone. This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw. This here new Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began. Suddenly he saw what Stamp Paid wanted him to see: more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him. (164)

The repetition of "this here" and "new" indicates that Paul D sees Sethe not just in a new light, but as a completely different person, someone with whom he has no shared past, someone with whom he cannot sympathize. Unlike white culture, which views Sethe's actions as inhumane or as proof of her lack of love, Paul D understands her violent actions as the "claim" of love between mother and child. But for Paul D, who has survived by claiming nothing, this declaration is too dangerous. Paul D tells Sethe that her love is "too thick," indicating that a separation of self from what that self loves is necessary for both to survive. But when Sethe scoffs that "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't no love at all," Paul D finds no other rebuttal than to fall back upon the cultural narrative that asserts that it is always wrong for a mother to kill her child. Thus, Paul D declares, "You got two feet, Sethe, not four," judging her actions, as schoolteacher had, as indicative of a bestial, less-than human nature (165). Sympathy is breached, and "right then a forest sprang up between them; trackless and quiet," separating Paul D from the affectional family Sethe has created.

"Don't talk to me": Comparative Suffering and the Failure of Sympathy

Baby Suggs, who appears to be a model for love and sympathy in *Beloved* and is a leader within her community, also fails in this regard and, therefore, retreats to isolation, grief, and death. Baby Suggs seems to understand the healing power of sympathy and, after being freed, conducts holy services to which she invites all members of the free black community. She commands children to laugh, men to dance, and women to cry, which results in an emotional

outpouring, sympathetic sharing, and community affective bonding:

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart. (88)

As the men, women, and children blend through their shared actions, they also share each others' emotional responses. Preaching that "they [whites] do not love your flesh . . . don't love your eyes . . . do not love your hands," Baby Suggs tells the crowd that "*You* got to love it, *you!* . . . Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you . . . and the beat and beating heart, love that too." This community is made up of people who have been subject to enslavement and abuse because of their bodies—as Cheryl I. Harris argues in "Whiteness as Property," the non-whiteness of African American bodies is what makes them legally susceptible to being categorized as property, treated inhumanely, and subject to white people's hate and fear—and Baby Suggs offers her heart because love is an antidote to suffering. She urges them to love themselves as a process of discovering selfhood.

However, while Baby Suggs preaches love and while she cares for her daughter-in-law and grandchildren, she judges Sethe's suffering against her own. When Sethe once suggests they move to escape the wrath of the baby ghost inhabiting 124, Baby Suggs scoffs, "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief . . . Don't talk to me. You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. Be thankful, why don't you? I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I suspect, worrying somebody's house into evil" (5). Baby Suggs continuously mourns the loss of her children and her inability to know them despite refusing to

allow herself to attach to them because it had been too painful to love them only to have them taken from her.³¹ By suggesting that all enslaved people suffer, but some suffer in greater measure, Baby Suggs implies that greater suffering imparts more legitimacy to that suffering. She admonishes Sethe to “be thankful” because she has children left alive and with her and has never faced having any of them sold away, which implies that her suffering is not as great as what Baby Suggs herself has experienced. Baby Suggs’s response minimizes Sethe’s pain and suggests a difference between their experience that separates them: Sethe can’t “talk to” Baby Suggs because she can’t understand Baby Suggs’s loss. Like Paul D, Baby Suggs understands Sethe’s love for her children, but not her intense attachment to them or the connection between her children and her selfhood. Baby Suggs “didn’t approve of extra,” and would advise others that “Everything depends on knowing how much Good is knowing when to stop” (87).

Baby Suggs advocates a lifestyle of moderation, but she extends this to emotional experience, a logical response given her coping method of reducing her attachment to her own children. Thus, when Sethe explains that “I wouldn’t draw breath without my children,” Baby Suggs “got down on her knees to beg God’s pardon for me” (203). Baby Suggs believes that Sethe’s intense focus on her children requires forgiveness because it violates the message of grace and love—to love yourself—that she has been preaching. It also goes against Baby Suggs’s own forced separation from her children: she has had to survive, to “draw breath” without them because she had no other choice. In order to do so, she has separated herself from them, although her separation has not lessened her suffering. A mother who was allowed to be a mother to only one of her children, Baby Suggs continues to grieve for her children throughout her life, clinging to the remnants of small features that she recalls about those she lost—a lisp, a

³¹ Baby Suggs has been so hurt by the loss of her children that she is better prepared for news of Halle’s death “than she had [been] for his life” and “barely glanced” at him when he was born because “it wasn’t worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood anyway. Seven times she had done that” (139).

skin-color, a dimple, a love for burned bread. Thoughts of finding her scattered children are among her first thoughts in freedom—“where do I start? Get somebody to write old Whitlow. See who took Patty and Rosa Lee. Somebody name Dunn got Ardelia and went West, she heard. No point in trying for Tyree or John” (143)—and she claimed to “feel” the death of each one of her children.³² As a result, Baby Suggs believes that “the sadness was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home. Sad as it was that she did not know where her children were buried or what they looked like if alive, fact was she knew more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like” (140). Despite believing that the loss of her children has contributed to her loss of self, Baby Suggs reproaches Sethe because she believes their situations are comparative—they have both lost children—and “knowing when to stop” separates Baby Suggs from Sethe.

Thus, Baby Suggs, who has connected self-identity, love, and community sympathy with holy redemption feels betrayed—indescribably broken—by Sethe’s violent act. Baby Suggs values the mother-child relationship, but despite grieving for her own children and because she survived by distancing herself from them, she cannot comprehend Sethe’s “claim” either. It is she who recalls Sethe from her shock, reminding her of her maternal role when she enters the woodshed and begins to care for the survivors. She tells Sethe, “It’s time to nurse your youngest,” coaxing Sethe to exchange the dead child for the living (152). However, when Sethe attempts to nurse Denver without first washing her older daughter’s blood off her chest, “They fought then. Like rivals over the heart of the loved, they fought. Each struggling for the nursing child. Baby Suggs lost when she slipped in a red puddle and fell. So Denver took her mother’s milk right along with the blood of her sister.” Baby Suggs’s fight with Sethe represents a conflict

³² During their reunion, Paul D inquires about Halle, and Sethe tells him, “I think he’s dead. It’s not being sure that keeps him alive” (8). When Paul D asks what Baby Suggs believed, Sethe asserts, “Same, but to listen to her, all her children is dead. Claimed she felt each one go the very day and hour.”

between their belief systems—Baby Suggs attempts to separate Sethe’s maternal love from what it cost to assert and maintain that familial and affectional tie. When Baby Suggs slips in the baby blood, she not only loses the battle but her action reveals her inability to understand both the price and the gains of what Sethe has done. Denver drinks both milk-love and the blood of her sister, representing the extreme cost to African American women in asserting this claim over their bodies and their families: both substances are fundamental to her survival.

After these bloody events, Baby Suggs loses her faith and retreats to the bedroom to ponder color. Because she could not protect her family through the sympathetic love she has preached in the Clearing and because she does not agree with Sethe’s behavior, she questions the usefulness of sympathy itself. Helpless to prevent schoolteacher from entering her yard and saddened by what she believes is disapproval in the African American community that prevented anyone from warning them, Baby Suggs is confronted with her own powerlessness and the seeming passivity of sympathy: “The heart that pumped out love, the mouth that spoke the Word, didn’t count. They came in her yard anyway and she could not approve or condemn Sethe’s rough choice” (180). Although she had urged love as an antidote to suffering and encouraged sympathy as a way to create kinship, Baby Suggs believes that her community sees her love as pride, holding back from protecting her family and drawing further away when they are shocked by Sethe’s actions: “After sixty years of losing children to the people who chewed up her life and spit it out like a fish bone . . . to belong to a community of free Negroes—to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counseled, protect and be protected, feed and be fed—and then to have that community step back and hold itself at a distance—well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy” (177). Because love is not enough, and it now appears that sympathy is not enough, Baby Suggs “believed she had lied. There was no grace—imaginary or real—and no sunlit dance

in a Clearing could change that. Her faith, her love, her imagination and her great big old heart began to collapse twenty-eight days after her daughter-in-law arrived” (89). She is convinced that “[h]er authority in the pulpit, her dance in the Clearing, her powerful Call . . . all that had been mocked and rebuked by the bloodspill in her backyard. God puzzled her and she was too ashamed of Him to say so” (177). Baby Suggs’s “great big old heart” loses the ability to create or maintain affectional bonds; she is left isolated and alone, feeling that “Her past had been like her present—intolerable—and since she knew death was anything but forgetfulness, she used the little energy left her for pondering color” (4).

When Baby Suggs and Sethe first arrive among the Ohio free black community, they find friendship and sympathy among the people there. But because individual members of the community engage in comparisons of their suffering—either measuring their experiences of slavery and abuse against each others’ or feeling unable to appreciate someone else’s suffering as equal in depth to their own—their ability to maintain affectional bonds and create community kinship is inhibited. Members focus on differences in suffering, insisting not only that each person must experience pain of acceptable depth but also that this pain be ongoing—in order to receive sympathy, one must demonstrate that one *continues* to suffer. The community considers anyone who shows freedom from suffering as prideful, punishing that person through isolation. It is not until members of the community acknowledge Sethe’s continued pain and overcome their aversion to her actions—accepting the difference in her choice and her experiences—that they are able to extend sympathy. With Denver acting as a bridge in this process, the community serves as a catalyst for the release of the ghost (or demon, depending on how one interprets Beloved’s presence) and brings Sethe back into a unified community that has the potential to heal beyond its suffering.

Earlier, members of the community perceive Baby Suggs as suffering in the ways that they do, when she preaches out of her pain and gives them her “great big heart,” the group establishes sympathy and kinship. Deriving authority from their shared experiences—the loss of loved ones and the loss of a self created in slavery—and her deep understanding of their suffering, Baby Suggs becomes the central figure that binds the community together. More than a preacher, she is also a symbolic mother to the entire kinship group, which has been affectionally bonded in the style of an extended sympathetic family. Her home—a spatial symbol of family organization—becomes a “cheerful, buzzing” center of activity, where she “loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed” just as a mother provides love and moral guidance as well as caring for the bodily needs of her children (86-87). This kinship is extended outside of the established community to other African Americans, as “strangers”—fugitive slaves—are invited to rest at her home, and individuals freely leave messages there, “for whoever needed them was sure to stop in one day soon” (87).

A party spontaneously grows out of Baby Suggs’s joy at Sethe and her children’s arrival and Stamp Paid’s impulsive gift of fresh blackberries, because she quickly determines that they have too much food “to keep for one’s own” (136). While recognizing the primary needs of her immediate family—“one’s own”—Baby Suggs’s maternal impulse is also to share her good fortune and her happiness with her extended kinship circle, so that what starts out as a few blackberry pies transforms to “a feast for ninety people.” Although members of the community “ate so well, and laughed so much” at the party, when the next morning they considered the bounty and merriment on display, they grew angry at what they term Baby Suggs’s pride. Exaggerating the amount of food to mythical proportions—“three (maybe four) pies grew to ten (maybe twelve) . . . two hens became five turkeys. The one block of ice . . . Became a wagonload

of ice cakes”—the townspeople imagine that Baby Suggs and her family have far more material resources than anyone else in town (137). They angrily question Baby Suggs’s authority as the bonding agent of their kinship circle: “Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the center of things? . . . Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone.” Suddenly, Baby Suggs’s loving heart and her gifts to the community become signs of privilege, which set her apart and above the group she seeks to unite. Her reunion with and joy in her biological family cause her affectional family to question the strength of their ties, and they feel insecure about the source of her authority as well as their places in the kinship circle.

Equally significant is the fact that Baby Suggs’s happiness in this moment makes them forget about her suffering, causing them to lose sympathy for her. Although they acknowledge that she has also lived in slavery, they begin to concentrate on the differences of their experiences, minimizing her suffering to the point of negating it. Comparing their own experiences in slavery against what they imagine to be hers, they picture her as

an ex-slave who had probably never carried one hundred pounds to the scale, or picked okra with a baby on her back. Who had never been lashed by a ten-year-old whiteboy as God knows they had. Who had not even escaped slavery—had, in fact, been *bought out* of it by a doting son and *driven* to the Ohio River in a wagon—free papers folded between her breasts (driven by the very man who had been her master, who also paid her resettlement fee—name of Garner), and rented a house with *two* floors *and* a well from the Bodwins. (137)

These comparisons recall resentment between slaves who worked in the fields—who carried hundred pound sacks of cotton, picked okra, and were publicly whipped—and slaves who worked in the master’s house—who cooked, cleaned, and served—that were perceived to live in slightly more privilege or protection. As numerous slave narratives have revealed, however,

serving in the master's house may have entailed a great deal of suffering, including bodily and psychological risk. Further, such projections onto Baby Suggs ignore the realities of her past. Reflecting on Sweet Home, Baby Suggs observes that the farm is "tiny" compared to the "places she had been," but appreciates her new situation because "there wasn't a rice field or tobacco patch in sight, and nobody, but nobody, knocked her down. Not once . . . nobody said you-black-bitch-what's-the-matter-with-you and nobody knocked her down" (139). Baby Suggs also walks with a limp because of "the field work that broke her hip" and is grateful that the Garners didn't force their slaves to mate, "[n]ever brought them to her cabin with directions to 'lay down with her,' like they did in Carolina" (140). Although Baby Suggs eventually found a less arduous work experience at Sweet Home and was granted her freedom, she experienced similar forms of suffering. Further, her freedom was obtained at great cost, as she witnessed her son Halle give up his remaining life and labor to their white owners in order to buy her, accepting separation from the last child that remained to her.

By minimizing Baby Suggs's suffering in comparison to their own, members of the community establish differences that prevent them from feeling the sympathy they previously did. They grow angry at the appearance of Baby Suggs's lack of suffering, calling it arrogance: "It made them furious. They swallowed baking soda, the morning after, to calm the stomach violence caused by the bounty, the reckless generosity on display at 124. Whispered to each other in the yards about fat rats, doom and uncalled-for pride" (137). Baby Suggs, sensitive to the mood of her community, believes that she has incurred their resentment because she has "overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess" (138). Indeed, she has. But it is not the excess of the feast that offends, it is the excess of joy—the lack of suffering—on display. In a community that *requires* suffering for sympathetic inclusion, the visible presence of *continued*

suffering is necessary.

It is this lack of sympathy that causes the community to fail Baby Suggs and Sethe when schoolteacher and his nephews appear in town:

Nobody warned them . . . it wasn't the exhaustion from a long day's gorging that dulled them, but some other thing—like, well, like meanness—that let them stand aside, or not pay attention, or tell themselves somebody else was probably bearing the news already to the house Not Ella, not John, not anybody ran down or to Bluestone Road, to say some new whitefolks with the Look just rode in. (152, 157)

Perceived differences in suffering result in emotional withholding rather than sympathetic support. This “meanness” is a misguided wish to bring a member of the community back into alignment by proving that they suffer in equal measure. Just as later, when “everybody in town was longing for Sethe to come on difficult times” because her “outrageous claims, her self-sufficiency seemed to demand it” (171), failing to act stems from a desire for perceived non-sufferer to experience suffering that reminds them of the experiences of those in pain and returns them to a position within that sympathetic community—one cannot be a member of this community if one is not actively engaged with suffering. Sethe's past suffering does not engender sympathy because her self-sufficiency suggests that she no longer requires the group's support.

By choosing not to act, the community contributes to the events that culminate in Sethe's desperate, violent response to the prospect of being re-enslaved. As shocked as they are by Sethe's choices, these events place Baby Suggs and Sethe in sympathetic positions because Sethe is once again under the control of whites—although not returned to slavery, she is arrested and sent to jail—and Baby Suggs loses her reunited, happy family—one of her grandchildren is dead, two are injured, and her daughter-in-law and granddaughter are in jail. Thus, the community's initial response is to extend sympathy and support. However, Sethe refuses to demonstrate

suffering:

Outside a throng, now, of black faces stopped murmuring. Holding the living child, Sethe walked past them in their silence and hers. She climbed into the cart, her profile knife-clean against a cheery blue sky. A profile that shocked them with its clarity. Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably. Otherwise the singing would have begun at once, the moment she appeared in the doorway of the house on Bluestone Road. Some cape of sound would have quickly been wrapped around her, like arms to hold and steady her on the way. As it was, they waited till the cart turned about, headed west to town. And then no words. Humming. No words at all. (152)

It is clear that Sethe believes her actions are protective, not destructive. In attempting to kill her children, she radically claims her role as a mother and accomplishes her goal of keeping them out of slavery, for the second time. Although she mourns the loss of her daughter and clearly suffered under slavery, she does not demonstrate a form of suffering the community expects. Thus, they do not sing to her, do not offer group-song to reach out “like arms to hold and steady her” because she does not appear to need steadying or their sympathy. Her refusal to demonstrate recognizable suffering makes her ineligible for their sympathy, and they respond with silence and emotional withholding. After these events, members of the community no longer visit 124, avoiding Baby Suggs and symbolically abandoning the family home and the extended, sympathetic family structure it represents.

Stamp Paid as a Transitional Catalyst to Sympathy

Stamp Paid, an influential and well regarded community member, serves as a transitional figure who symbolizes the need to recognize differences in suffering and to find sympathy in healing after suffering. Although he is guilty of pushing Paul D to confront Sethe, he later serves as a catalyst in helping members of the community accept Sethe by allowing for the differences in suffering and acknowledging the prejudices that caused them to withhold their sympathy.

Stamp Paid acquired his name from surviving the humiliation of being unable to prevent his wife

from being forced to become a concubine in slavery:

Born Joshua, he renamed himself when he handed over his wife to his master's son. Handed her over in the sense that he did not kill anybody, thereby himself, because his wife demanded he stay alive. Otherwise, she reasoned, where and to whom could she return when the boy was through? With that gift, he decided that he didn't owe anybody anything. Whatever his obligations were, that act paid them off. (184-85)

Stamp Paid considers his non-resistance, his acceptance of this humiliation, a price paid for his life and eventual freedom. Ferrying other fugitives across the Ohio River, Stamp Paid extends "this debtlessness to other people," proclaiming that their suffering in slavery was enough to balance out their choices and to cancel out any future suffering: "He ferried them and rendered them paid for; gave them their own bill of sale, so to speak. 'You paid it; now life owes you'" (185). Stamp Paid had been an integral part of each of the events leading to Sethe's bloody confrontation with schoolteacher—he ferried her across the Ohio River, picked the blackberries that evolved into the feast, and saved Denver's life in the woodshed by grabbing her as Sethe swung her toward the wall. In the years that followed, Stamp Paid avoided 124 like the rest of the community, although he continued to love Baby Suggs and hoped she would return to preaching in the Clearing. Although he chides Baby Suggs for her loss of faith and her decision to withdraw and study color, at her death his care allows him to serve as an intermediary between Sethe and the community. He goes into the house to carry out Baby Suggs's body—the first and only time he had been in the house since "the Misery"—because "nobody besides himself would enter 124" (171).

Stamp Paid's remorse after showing Paul D the newspaper clipping forces him to consider his motivations in interfering with Sethe, recognizing that his actions reveal a lack of sympathy: "Afterward—not before—he considered Sethe's feelings in the matter. And it was the lateness of this consideration that made him feel so bad" (170). His guilt causes him to wonder if

he had “stopped the one shot she had of the happiness a good man could bring her” and if she was “vexed by the loss, the free and unasked-for revival of gossip by the man who had helped her cross the river and who was her friend as well as Baby Suggs” (169). He also considers the impact of his actions upon Denver: “Maybe he should have thought of Denver, if not Sethe, before he gave Paul D the news that ran him off, the one normal somebody in the girl’s life since Baby Suggs died” (170).

Although Stamp Paid has spent decades helping fugitives and promoting the view that slaves have paid their debt to life in suffering, his failure to think of Sethe and Denver is part of a personal history of failure to think beyond his own pain and feel sympathy for others’ suffering. Even though Stamp Paid suffered in his humiliation (and possibly in the pain one feels watching a loved one be hurt), he fails to recognize his wife’s suffering. The language he uses in telling the story of how he obtained his name focuses entirely on his own suffering and not on what his wife felt at being raped by her master’s son: he “handed her over,” he “did not kill anybody,” and she “demanded he stay alive.” Although Stamp Paid directs anger at the people who have power over the situation—stating that he “should have killed” his master’s son and deliberately shaming his master’s son’s wife in the hope that she might find a way to put a stop to it (232)—he exhibits rage and violent fantasies toward the person he loves. Stamp Paid tells Paul D that while his wife was serving as a mistress, he “never touched her all that time,” suggesting either that he sexually rejected her or, more likely, refrained from violence against her (233). Sexual rejection indicates that Stamp Paid views his wife’s rape as interfering with his own sexual relationship to her body—he feels too angry, hurt, or disgusted to have intimate relations with her. Refraining from physical violence implies that Stamp Paid had considered and rejected directing his rage at her in this way, projecting his anger at his master’s son onto her and revealing that he was angry at her

for submitting to abuse that was beyond her control. When his wife is finally released from her sexual bondage, she says, “I’m back, Josh,” signaling that she has returned to him both physically and emotionally, but Stamp Paid, “looked at the back of her neck. She had a real small neck. I decided to break it. You know, like a twig—just snap it.” Although Stamp Paid doesn’t actually harm his wife, his violent fantasies are a projection of his anger and reveal a lack of sympathy: he offers no consideration of the ways in which his wife suffers her prolonged period of rape, nor does it account for the suffering she may have experienced from an emotional rift with a husband who blames her for complying.³³ In a novel whose main character is a woman that experiences sexual assault and goes to extreme lengths to reclaim her body and self, Stamp Paid’s focus on his own suffering reveals a wide gulf between his proclaimed ideology and his lived practice.

In addition to feeling remorse over causing the breakup of Sethe’s relationship with Paul D and pushing Denver into further isolation, Stamp Paid experiences another turning point when he discovers a piece of ribbon in the bottom of his boat. He is shocked to realize that what he had first mistaken for a bird feather was actually “a red ribbon knotted around a curl of wet woolly hair, clinging still to its bit of scalp” (180). In a time of violence and lynchings, “four colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken, necks broken,” Stamp Paid is more distressed by the implications of the object he has found because it touches him viscerally. Walking home, he feels dizzy and asks “What *are* these people? You tell me, Jesus. What *are* they?” The physicality of this piece of ribbon, a woman’s or a child’s accessory, causes him to reflect on the

³³ Although Morrison makes it clear that Stamp Paid didn’t murder his wife in that moment, she leaves Vashti’s fate ambiguous. Paul D asks, “Did you? Snap it?” and Stamp Paid replies, “Uh uh. I changed my name” (233). However, when Stamp Paid explains that he escaped by boating up the Mississippi and walking the rest of the way, he only says that Vashti died and offers no further details.

abuses white people have inflicted on African Americans as a group and his love for Baby Suggs. Brought into physical and emotional connection with an anonymous woman's suffering, he recognizes a larger communal suffering that encompasses and surpasses his own. Stamp Paid thus develops a new understanding of Baby Suggs's pain and her withdrawal from the world, which motivates him to sympathize and reconnect Sethe: "He kept the ribbon; the skin smell nagged him, and his weakened marrow made him dwell on Baby Suggs' wish to consider what in the world was harmless Mistaking her, upbraiding her, owing her, now he needed to let her know he knew, and to get right with her and her kin." Stamp Paid's newfound sympathy motivates him to approach 124, which he does while "Fingering a ribbon and smelling skin" (176).

While Stamp Paid develops a new sympathetic awareness, his role as a transitional figure and catalyst means that his expression of sympathy alone is not sufficient to heal the breach with Sethe or to bring the community into sympathetic alignment with a larger history of suffering. Stamp Paid is unable to enter 124—finding it difficult to knock on the doors of a house that was once open to him and discovering that his knock, once made, isn't heard by the residents. Stamp Paid doesn't at first understand the noise he hears outside the house on Bluestone Road—which the reader understands to be the voices of the women inside—thinking that it's "a conflagration of voices" that he "couldn't describe or cipher" (273). But as he continues to return and knock on the door, he comes to believe "he knew who spoke them. The people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons" (181). Finally, Stamp Paid looks through the window, sees the backs of Sethe and Beloved, and hurries away, believing "the undecipherable language clamoring around the house was the mumbling of the black and angry dead" (198). As Stamp Paid abandons his efforts—leaving the women inside the house "free at

last to be what they liked, see whatever they saw and say whatever was on their minds” (199)—the past and the obsessive relationship that develops between Sethe and Beloved seems to have overwhelmed the family.

“In the beginning was the sound”: Re-asserting Sympathetic Community

Critics have vigorously debated Beloved’s identity, ranging from interpreting her as literally an anonymous slave woman who has escaped slavery (House), to Sethe’s daughter returned in ghost form (Demetrakopoulos; Edwards; Trudier Harris; Wyatt), to the embodiment of slave history (Clemons; Holden-Kirwan), to an amalgamation of the ghost of both Sethe’s daughter and her mother (Horvitz), to the explanation Morrison suggests in the text of a young woman who escaped from sexual captivity as Ella had done. What is clear, however, is that *Sethe believes* Beloved to be her daughter and wishes Beloved to participate in the “rememory” of her own past and to demonstrate understanding of her choices. It is also clear that Beloved is associated with more than Sethe’s individual suffering. Beloved blends time (“All of it is now”), references experiences from the Middle Passage (“I am always crouching storms rock us and mix the men into the women and the women into the men”), and connects Sethe to those Middle Passage experiences (“the woman is there with the face I want The woman with my face is in the sea Sethe’s face is the face that left me”) (271). The language in the “rememory” chapters is fractured and disconnected in a postmodern fashion, breaking the possibility of straightforward narrative of linear connection. It is associative and links Sethe’s present to the larger suffering Beloved recalls.

Sethe believes that Beloved’s return is an opportunity for personal healing, a signal that her actions have been viewed with sympathy and that she can move forward in the full

realization of the relationship she had sacrificed so much to claim: “Now I can look at things again because she’s here to see them too. After the shed, I stopped Because you mine and I have to show you these things, teach you what a mother should” (201). Because Beloved is connected to the larger, collective traumas of slavery, she also represents the potential for healing through sympathy from this past of suffering: “Denver don’t like for me to talk about it. She hates anything about Sweet Home except how she was born. But you was there and even if you too young to memory it, I can tell it to you” (202). Sethe believes she “don’t have to explain a thing” but that because she chooses to explain, Beloved will “understand, because she understands everything already she’ll understand. She my daughter” (200). Sethe expects Beloved to extend sympathetic understanding toward her because of their shared past, their emotional bond, and their blood ties. However, while the relationship at first seems to offer Sethe the affectional and sympathetic relationship she craves, as Beloved’s power over her grows the sympathy evaporates. Rather than releasing Sethe from her memories and absolving her of guilt, trauma, and pain, Beloved—in reminding her of her failings—becomes selfish, violent, and vengeful. Beloved does not show sympathy to Sethe, nor does she share her suffering; in fact she forces her to dwell continuously in her painful past.

Finally, Sethe’s relationship with Beloved becomes a destructive spiral that costs Sethe her physical and emotional health. Beloved appears to “feed” on Sethe’s guilt and her desire to make up for past injuries, selfishly consuming all of her love, energy, and resources. Although the change occurs gradually, Beloved shifts from asking for stories from Sethe’s past to accusing her of “leaving her behind,” blaming Sethe for her suffering, and throwing tantrums in order to manipulate Sethe into giving her what she desires (241). Rather than finding sympathy with a prodigal daughter who relates to Sethe’s choices because she remembers her suffering, Beloved

denies Sethe's explanations that she acted out of love, and Beloved's experiences from the "other side" are far greater than anything for which Sethe can atone. Thus, Sethe's health deteriorates as Beloved becomes a succubus, seducing her through the desire for sympathy rather than sex, draining Sethe of her selfhood and vitality while Sethe clings to the possibility of understanding and release.

The consumption of Sethe by her pain—by a suffering too great for any single person to overcome—prompts a recognition of the limits of a sympathy that requires its recipients to experience continuous and homogenous forms of suffering. Witnessing Sethe's struggle prompts Denver to feel sympathy for Sethe in new ways. Previously, Denver has felt cautious toward the mother who once tried to kill her and resentful of any memories from the Sweet Home past in which she cannot share. Thus, she has preferred to focus upon the story of her birth, the only story that allows her to understand Sethe's experiences and enables her in the re-telling to feel "how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked" (78). Because Beloved appears to offer an affectional bond that Denver lacks—due to mistrust—with her mother as well as the opportunity, through storytelling, to share a common past, Denver is at first also drawn to Beloved. She is fearful that her mother might harm Beloved, but as she watches Sethe's decline, "The job she started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved" (243). Thus, Denver crosses the threshold of 124 for the first time, to seek help from members of the community. After women in the community leave food gifts, Denver visits their homes to thank them, which allows her to talk with people who previously shunned her family: "a small conversation took place. All of them knew her grandmother and some had even danced with her in the Clearing" (249). In these exchanges, they share memories with her:

Others remembered the days when 124 was a way station, the place they assembled to catch news, taste oxtail soup, leave their children, cut out a skirt. One remembered the

tonic mixed there that cured a relative. One showed her the border of a pillowslip, the stamens of its pale blue flowers French-knotted in Baby Suggs' kitchen by the light of an oil lamp while arguing the Settlement Fee. They remembered the party with twelve turkeys and tubs of strawberry smash. One said she wrapped Denver when she was a single day old and cut shoes to fit her mother's blasted feet. (249)

By reaching out, Denver begins to reestablish affectional bonds and reform a sympathetic community not only through shared experience—the women relate memories of Baby Suggs and the home Denver lives in—but also unshared experience—times Denver cannot remember because she was too young. In so doing, “the personal pride, the arrogant claim staked out at 124 seemed to them to have run its course. They whispered, naturally, wondered, shook their heads . . . but it didn't stop them from caring whether she ate and it didn't stop the pleasure they took in her soft ‘Thank you’” (250). Thus, the kinship structure of the community begins to re-assert, as the women feel a protective care for Denver and want to provide for her needs. Furthermore, Denver's explanation of why she needs assistance reveals Beloved's presence in the house and Sethe's growing infirmity, prompting concern by women of the community.

Stamp Paid, who reminds the community of their former love for Baby Suggs and her family, also shares the news about Beloved's existence and helps to motivate them toward a rediscovery of sympathy. He stands up against criticism of Sethe, reminding detractors of her connection to Baby Suggs as well as the unfairness of their judgment. Stamp Paid defends Sethe to his sister Ella when she criticizes Paul D for taking up with her, telling Ella, “You all was friends” and “You in deep water, girl” (187). Stamp Paid is the first to tell Ella about the unknown woman living at 124, which Ella thinks must be a spirit since Stamp Paid is sure the woman isn't Denver and you “Might see anything at all at 124” (185). As news spreads of Beloved's presence, rumors fly among the community, but it is Ella who then guides them into sympathy for Sethe despite their differences. The women “fell into three groups: those that

believed the worst; those that believed none of it; and those, like Ella, who thought it through” (255).

Ella doesn't understand or sympathize with Sethe's choices, and there is a marked difference in their suffering. Ella, who had been held prisoner in a house where she was shared by a father and son, “understood Sethe's rage in the shed twenty years ago, but not her reaction to it, which Ella thought was prideful, misdirected, and Sethe herself too complicated” (256). Her past experiences with these men “gave her a disgust for sex,” and she “measured all atrocities” against them. Significantly, Ella had also killed one of her own children, but in very different circumstances: she gave birth to, but refused to nurse, “a hairy white thing” that “lived five days never making a sound” (259). Ella's child was a product of rape and represented, to her, another violation. It was a “thing” rather than a child. Rather than claiming her body and selfhood by claiming ownership of her child, Ella did the opposite of Sethe: she claimed her self by refusing to be forced to become a mother. She understands Sethe's anger in relation to her own assault, but she does not comprehend Sethe's radical mother-love or her violence against the children she loves. However, even though Ella finds Sethe's crime “staggering,” she “didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present Daily life took as much as she had. The future was sunset; the past was something to leave behind. And if it didn't stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out” (256). Thus, when a woman asserts that Sethe might deserve the punishment inflicted by Beloved, that “she had it coming,” Ella counters “Nobody got that coming.” And when a woman protests that “You can't just up and kill your children,” Ella points out, “No, and the children can't just up and kill the mama.”

Ella leads the group of thirty women in approaching 124, their actions suggesting that they intend to confront, if not exorcise, Beloved from the house: “Some brought what they could

and what they believed would work. Stuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts. Others brought Christian faith—as shield and sword. Most brought a little of both. They had no idea what they would do once they got there” (257). When the women arrive at the house, they are reminded of the sympathetic community that had existed before Baby Suggs’s death and the way in which the house had functioned as a familial space:

. . . the first thing they saw was not Denver sitting on the steps, but themselves. Younger, stronger, even as little girls lying in the grass asleep. Catfish was popping grease in the pan and they saw themselves scoop German potato salad onto the plate. Cobbler oozing purple syrup colored their teeth. They sat on the porch, ran down to the creek, teased the men, hoisted children on their hips, or, if they were the children, straddled the ankles of old men who held their little hands while giving them a horsey ride. Baby Suggs laughed and skipped among them, urging more . . . there they were, young and happy, playing in Baby Suggs’ yard. (258)

The women pray in front of the house. But when Ella hollers, the kneeling and standing women instantly join her, taking “a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like” (259).

The gathering in front of the house begins to resemble the sympathetic blending of the Clearing, in which voices and movements join together with Ella serving, like Baby Suggs, as their guide. Indeed, for Sethe, “it was as though the Clearing had come to her . . . where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words . . . It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash” (261). The women breach the barrier of 124 with their sound, and Sethe sees “loving faces before her” (262). It is in that crucial moment that Bodwin appears and Sethe, mistaking him in her mind for schoolteacher, runs from her porch to attack him. Beloved watches from the porch as Sethe runs “into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind . . . Then Denver, running, too. Away from her to the pile of people out there. They make a hill. A hill of black people, falling.” Although Sethe’s confused action stems from her fear of Bodwin and her

desire to protect Beloved, it results in her reunion with a sympathetic group that, though struggling, literally embraces her and prevents her from further harming herself or others. Beloved disappears in this moment because Sethe has been reabsorbed by her community.

“a friend of my mind”: Healing Through Sympathy

The sympathy of Sethe’s community saves her from the all-consuming suffering that results from daily inhabiting the trauma of slavery. But Sethe’s personal road to healing begins with Paul D’s return. Paul D initially seeks Sethe and finds support with her because of their shared past at Sweet Home, but he leaves because Sethe’s radical claim of selfhood and motherhood displays a response to suffering that he cannot comprehend. Paul D, who has coped with pain by hiding his individual suffering deep within himself, cannot fully sympathize or connect with anyone else until he acknowledges that pain and learns to extend sympathy that is based on another’s experience of suffering rather than his own. Even as Paul D attempts to share what happened at Sweet Home after Sethe escapes, he finds it difficult to explain: “I never have talked about it. Not to a soul” (71). Although he tells Sethe about being collared and his jealousy of a rooster’s freedom in comparison to his own, he stops himself from going further:

Paul D had only begun, what he was telling her was only the beginning when her fingers on his knee, soft and reassuring, stopped him. Just as well. Just as well. Saying more might push them both to a place they couldn’t get back from. He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut. He would not pry it loose now in front of this sweet sturdy woman, for if she got a whiff of the contents it would shame him. (72-73)

Paul D not only prevents Sethe from understanding his suffering, but withholding his emotions inhibits him from understanding her. He maintains a view of Sethe formed from his memories and impressions in the past, a view which upholds his need to repress his suffering and does not allow him to understand her present-day self. This boundary, however, breaks down because of

Beloved's controversial presence as well as the information that changes Paul D's perspective on Sethe. Beloved not only becomes a source of conflict between the pair, but, in her efforts to separate Paul D and Sethe, she acts again as succubus, seducing him throughout the house and in the woodshed, and forces him to confront the painful memories he has tried to lock away: "She moved closer with a footfall he didn't hear and he didn't hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn't know it. What he knew was that when he reached the inside part he was saying, 'Red heart. Red heart,' over and over again" (227).

When Paul D's confrontation with Sethe reveals a person he doesn't recognize, he is devastated, unable to sympathize with her, and consumed by his suffering:

Warmth and red eyes. He held his wrist between his knees, not to keep his hands still but because he had nothing else to hold on to. His tobacco tin, blown open, spilled contents that floated freely and made him their play and prey. He couldn't figure out why it took so long. He may as well have jumped in the fire with Sixo and they both could have a good laugh. Surrender was bound to come anyway. (218)

It is Stamp Paid, however, who reaches out to Paul D, despite having been a catalyst for separating them. He not only defends Sethe but also attempts to explain her actions and helps Paul D to understand that suffering is a part of everyone. Stamp Paid recognizes the love in Sethe's act and interprets her violence as an effort to outsmart the cause of suffering: "I was there She ain't crazy. She love those children. She was trying to out-hurt the hurter" (234). Stamp Paid's efforts to defend Sethe bring him and Paul D to a discussion of Beloved as the greater threat, and Paul D explains that she "reminds me of something. Something, look like, I'm supposed to remember." Given that Paul D has repressed, or "forgotten" suffering that is never truly left behind, he acknowledges that what truly frightens him and what separates him from Sethe is a larger history of slavery. Thus, Paul D is shaken by a "bone-cold spasm" that recalls a

catalog of suffering: “bad whiskey, nights in the cellar, pig fever, iron bits, smiling roosters, fired feet, laughing dead men, hissing grass, rain, apple blossoms, neck jewelry, Judy in the slaughterhouse, Halle in the butter, ghost-white stairs, choke-cherry trees, cameo pins, aspens, Paul A’s face, sausage, or the loss of a red, red heart” (235). But when he asks, “How much is a nigger supposed to take?” Stamp Paid responds, “All he can.” By advocating for Sethe, sharing his own story, and acknowledging Paul D’s suffering, Stamp Paid provides a model for sympathy that acknowledges difference and allows space for healing.

Thus, Paul D’s “coming is the reverse of his going,” as he gradually works his way back into the house and toward Sethe (263). After the attack on Bodwin, Paul D and Stamp Paid discuss Sethe’s actions, making jokes about how “That woman is crazy” instead of seriously debating her sanity:

“Every time a whiteman come to the door she got to kill somebody?”
“For all she know, the man could be coming for the rent.”
“Wouldn’t nobody get no letter.”
“Except the postman.”
“Be a mighty hard message.”
“And his last.” (265)

Their conversation resembles the signifying of African American oral tradition that binds and bonds communities, using doublespeak and humor (akin to playing the dozens) to point out the underlying tensions and, in this case, diffuse them. When he returns to 124, Paul D examines the house, reviewing the bedroom he and Sethe once occupied, looking at the bed which “seems to him a place he is not” and forcing himself to “picture himself lying there, and when he sees it, it lifts his spirit” (270). Imagining himself part of Sethe’s house, part of Sethe’s bed, Paul D projects a relationship between them, reconstructing the affectional bond they once held in preparation for the bond he hopes to re-establish.

But when Paul D finds Sethe lying in Baby Suggs’s room singing lullabies, she appears

ill and worn out. She is dwelling on the past. As Paul D considers her, he recalls Sixo's words about the woman he loved: "She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in the right order" (272-73). In this moment, Paul D realizes that his love for Sethe is not just because of their shared experiences. He accepts her differences, her individual qualities, extending sympathy that acknowledges differences in suffering while recognizing that she has been able to do the same for him:

He is staring at the quilt but he is thinking about her wrought-iron back; the delicious mouth still puffy at the corner from Ella's fist. The mean black eyes. The wet dress steaming before the fire. Her tenderness about his neck jewelry—its three wands, like attentive baby rattlers, curving two feet into the air. How she never mentioned or looked at it, so he did not have to feel the shame of being collared like a beast. Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers. (273)

Paul D recognizes that this form of sympathy, of putting "his story next to hers" acknowledges the past and creates an opportunity for healing, telling Sethe, "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow." Thus, Paul D seeks to remind her of the selfhood she sought to claim in the first place, explaining that the loss of Beloved is not the loss of herself so much as a discovery of it: "You your best thing, Sethe. You are."

The novel ends on a hopeful note, suggesting that Paul D has recalled Sethe to herself and initiated a process of sympathy that will foster healing and complete her reintegration into a community that has fully accepted them both. Bruised and beaten but not yet defeated, Sethe needs the care of someone who understands her suffering and releases her from it, encouraging her to leave that pain in the past and define herself by the valuable qualities she still possesses, the qualities that enabled her to survive the trials of slavery in the first place. *Beloved* is a testament not only to power of self but also to the power of sympathy, so long as that sympathy accepts difference and allows the sufferer to move forward.

A Postmodern Sentimental Novel: Morrison's Deconstructed Neo-Slave Narrative

Beloved is considered a postmodern neo-slave narrative because of its blurring of the past and present and its questioning of grand historical metanarratives. Although it borrows many features from nineteenth-century slave narratives and focuses on the movement from bondage to freedom—literally, psychologically, and emotionally—Morrison's novel is a blend of genres. Stylistically, it employs typical features of the postmodern novel such as achronological narrative structure, shifts in perspective, polyvocal narration, use of the lyric, and incorporation of musical structures. Some chapters mimic free-verse poetry, with fractured narrative and no clear speaker. Unlike Walker's historical fiction, *Beloved* does not attempt to tell a straightforward account of the past, setting forth an alternative historical record that revises past perceptions and mirrors the rhetorical style of nineteenth-century slave narratives. Instead, it draws from that history in order to challenge the idea that any historical telling can be straightforward at all. As with many postmodern texts, *Beloved* not only pushes against the idea that the past can be narrated in a straight, cause-and-effect method but also that there is a single version of events that falls into a neatly contained story. *Beloved* highlights the polyvocality of history, the fact that millions of African Americans experienced slavery and, while they suffered similar abuses, each person suffered individually and possesses a unique perspective on how it affected them. As a genre, neo-slave narratives already do some of this work by countering the grand narrative posited in a historical record written largely by whites, but *Beloved* goes further in fragmenting that metanarrative by giving voice to individuals from the past.

While the characters in Butler's *Kindred* jump back and forth in time, Morrison's characters experience the past and present as fluid, where memories—termed “rememory”—can occur as physical remnants, experiences that can be bumped into, that are “out there, in the world

. . . waiting for you” (35-36). Morrison and Butler both emphasize the close links between past and present, but they differ on the manner of the connection. Thus, Morrison’s novel does not so much argue, as Butler’s does, for African Americans to reacquaint themselves with their pasts in order to understand their present, but that the past is already a part of present-day experience that must be understood as a living force. Morrison’s work in editing *The Black Book* has often been cited in connection to *Beloved* because it was during that time she came across the story of Margaret Garner. However, Morrison found more than just African American suffering in those centuries-old newspaper clippings. She found accounts of horrific abuses rendered in matter-of-fact language, but she also found instances of charity, love, and courage:

The two histories merge in the book, as in life, in a noon heat of brutality and compassion, outrage and satisfaction. Thus, it was that very mix that made editing the book so painful. Yet as the book suggests, pain, anger, befuddlement, melancholy and despair were not—are not—the only emotions defining the lives of black people in this country. (“Rediscovering”)

Morrison recognized the mixture of suffering and compassion as an important part of African American culture that had significant meaning for contemporary conflicts: “There was a time, heretical as it sounds, when we knew who we were. One could see that knowledge, that coherence in our wide-spirited celebration of life and our infinite tolerance of differences. We thought little about ‘unity’ because we loved those differences among us.”

In writing *Beloved*, Morrison sought to give voice to the multiple speakers of African American slave experience and to, in many ways, remind readers of the importance of hearing those voices. When Bonnie Angelo of *Time* praised Morrison in an interview for giving “new insight into the daily struggle of slaves,” Morrison insisted that her goal was much larger, that she wished to bring readers into a personal, sympathetic relationship with those who had lived that history: “I was trying to make it a personal experience. The book was not about the

institution—Slavery with a capital S. It was about these anonymous people called slaves. What they do to keep on, how they make a life, what they're willing to risk, however long it lasts, in order to relate to one another—that was incredible to me.” When Cecil Brown asked Morrison about Crouch’s negative review of her novel and his assertion that Morrison was making inappropriate comparisons to the Holocaust, she reiterated that she was not interested in comparative suffering but suffering itself, as exemplified in each individual: “The game of who suffered most? I’m not playing that game. That’s a media argument. It’s almost about quantity. One dead child is enough for me” (466).

Morrison has long resisted the label of magical realism for her work, despite incorporating fantastic elements like the ghost-figure of Beloved and Milkman’s ability to fly in *Song of Solomon* (1977). Instead of magic, Morrison describes her use of fantastic elements as a blend of history, symbolism, and African American mythology designed to reach readers through familiar cultural signs. Just as sentimental novelists relied upon easily recognizable symbols and tropes to convey particular messages to their readers, Morrison incorporates African American cultural mythology to communicate with her intended audience:

I just tried to see what was already there, and to use that as a kind of well-spring for my own work. Instead of inventing myths . . . I was just interested in finding what myths already existed . . . I have too much respect for black people’s imagination to suppose I can invent something for them. We have always done it. It’s just the way in which I can employ them. You know, it's not unusual. Joyce uses the Ulysses myth and people use other things. I just use the ones that already exist, and I appropriate them for texts and characters. (Brown, C 462-63)

Morrison appropriates both existing mythology and the voices of people from the past—fictionalizing not just Margaret Garner but her family and the millions of slaves who lived centuries ago—in order to revise the slave narrative genre, expanding it and making room for difference. This process brings readers in closer sympathy to the characters from the past. The

sentimental novel extended sympathy across race, gender, and class boundaries; Morrison's novel does this while also extending sympathy through time, to bring African Americans of the past and present together. In revising the methods of sentimentalism, Morrison revises the methods of sympathy itself, offering new opportunities for a return to a time "when we knew who we were . . . [and] loved those differences among us."

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that sentimentalism not only survived well beyond the turn of the century, but that it remains a popular genre³⁴ that appeals to common readers and that it continues to do “cultural work.” Although twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers often grapple with the cultural norms established by sentimental texts, they work from a foundation of race, gender, and class conventions that were popularized by nineteenth-century novels. Many widespread contemporary beliefs about the nuclear family, about domesticity and middle-class life, about mothers, about gender—women’s “natural emotional sensitivity” and men’s “inherent need to provide”—and about the behaviors and personal traits of whites and blacks were formed during the nineteenth-century, shaped by the characters and events in sentimental fiction. While modern authors often complicate these beliefs, they are aware that their readers are not only familiar with them but continue to feel emotionally connected to them because they have been absorbed into constructions of American identity. While nineteenth-century sentimentalism was primarily associated with reform because of the way it promoted changes in the American cultural landscape, twentieth- and twenty-first-century sentimentalism is appealing because it is soothing, crossing many divisive modern boundaries and reflecting familiar beliefs about ourselves. Because of the influences of modernism and other critical schools, audiences demand realism and refuse the stilted constructions of past sentimentalism, while also preferring to engage with sympathy and emotional connection as a driving human force. Thus, contemporary

³⁴ As with nineteenth-century sentimental texts, I must use the term “genre” loosely. These texts are connected through their use of the sentimental mode, but other methods by which we define genre—such as specific plot conventions or stylistic features—do not capture all of the works that are germane to this category.

authors work within a sentimental matrix that infuses cultural products with a self-consciousness: one is both living within a culture shaped everywhere by sentimentalism and skeptical of it.

Throughout the past century, cultural shifts due to economic changes, World Wars, Civil Rights battles, sexual revolutions, feminism, and changing immigration patterns created new arrangements of insiders and outsiders. Sentimentalism remains a useful method of promoting sympathy across boundaries during and after these cultural upheavals, encouraging reforms and offering sympathy to newly visible “Others” to reconnect them to the dominant group. Although the laboring class has always existed, the rise of industrialization and urbanization in the mid- to late-nineteenth century created new middle- and working-class structures that differed from previous social formations. After a period of prosperity, the 1929 Crash and the Great Depression brought attention to the plight of the working-class. Authors who adopted sentimentalism to write about miners, factory workers, and farmers were not only arguing for social reform but also for their inclusion in American society, showing working-class familial structures and struggles, and revealing them as a reflection of the American Dream—but these families were more often the result of the failed dream. Similarly, the United States has a shameful history of slavery and colonialism, so its past has always been multi-racial. Nineteenth-century sentimental fiction focused on abolitionist debates and presented African American identity from an antebellum perspective. In the twentieth-century, slavery has been abolished but African Americans have experienced decades of institutionalized racism and continue to work toward cultural equality. Although African Americans are not new outsiders, the way in which their status as “Others” is established continues to evolve. Thus, contemporary authors can trace African American marginalization to slavery while also acknowledging the nuances of modern conflict. Sentimentalism allows such authors to outline the history of racism as well as reform

efforts, developing sympathy for the “Other” while also showing the ways in which sentimentalism often maintains white dominance.

The working class and people of color, I would argue, remain the primary inheritors of the contemporary sentimental tradition because of its association with defining white, female, middle-class identity (and, therefore, defining its opposite). However, the appeals of sympathy and the sentimental mode are not limited to these subjects, and the twentieth-century has seen exponential growth of its use. Because of the way in which sentimentalism touches readers and audiences on a personal level and because it redefines the most intimate unit that organizes our lives—the family—it is an infinitely flexible mode. One such way in which sentimentalism has been adapted is to expand beyond the assumption that the recipients of sympathy are either female or heterosexual. With broader visibility of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer issues, twentieth- and twenty-first century authors have adopted sentimentalism to capture the experiences of and to extend sympathy to these marginalized groups. Although Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick warns against “a sentimental appropriation by the large culture of male homosexuality as spectacle,” many authors have appropriated the sentimental tradition for their own uses (144). James Baldwin—who resisted the label of sentimentalism because of its feminized and spectacularized associations—still drew upon its sympathetic powers, portraying the struggle of a gay man to accept himself and his refusal to be a part of any family—blood-related, affectional, or associational—in *Giovanni’s Room* (1956).

The AIDS crisis, particularly in the 1980s, also offered new opportunities to draw gays as deserving of sympathy and as part of the national family. As Robert J. Corber argues in “Nationalizing the Gay Body: AIDS and Sentimental Pedagogy in *Philadelphia*,” AIDS activists mobilized a form of sentimentality that borrowed from ongoing Civil Rights efforts

to focus attention on the persistence of racism and sexism without alienating mainstream Americans. These groups have emphasized the pain and suffering caused by their marginalization from national life so as to avoid appearing to engage in identity politics. Rather than antidiscrimination legislation and affirmative action programs, they have sought the “healing” and “closure” promised by the mass witnessing of their suffering. (109)

Thus, Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*³⁵ presents the struggles of gay men facing the AIDS crisis during the Reagan Era. The plays make gay men’s suffering visible by revealing the ways in which AIDS devastates the gay community, destroying relationships and decimating extended networks of “chosen families.” However, after retroviral treatments became more effective, sentimental gay and lesbian fiction began again to focus on suffering that was produced by marginalization. Annie Proulx’s “Brokeback Mountain,” which was published in *The New Yorker* in 1997 and made into an Oscar-winning film in 2005, signaled a popular shift away from the threat of AIDS to focusing on gay men’s emotional lives and their inability to live openly as well as their struggles to choose—as in *Giovanni’s Room*—to which family they belong when the impact of that choice is a perceived negation of masculinity and a potential risk to their lives.

Sentimentalism is an adaptable mode. It enables presentations of outsiders and “Others” in ways that can support hegemonic structures or challenge them, sometimes both at the same time. Thus, the 2009 film *Avatar* can excite and entice white American audiences into enthusiastically cheering for Na’vi aliens to defeat American industrial colonizers, despite the fact that the story is a clear parallel of our own colonial past (and some might argue, present). The Na’vi both visually and behaviorally resemble Native Americans, and they are voiced by Native and African American actors, while the industrialists who want to destroy their world in order to mine a valuable mineral are white Americans who wear U.S.-style military fatigues or

³⁵ *Angels in America* is a two-play series. *Part One, Millennium Approaches* was first performed in May 1990, receiving its world premiere in 1991. *Part Two, Perestroika* premiered in 1992.

the Oxford shirt of corporate America. However, audiences are entranced by the paraplegic Corporal Jake Sully who, through science fiction technology, takes on the body of a Na'vi. He not only becomes a powerful warrior in the tribe, but he also sympathizes with their plight and, in so doing, teaches audiences to feel the same sympathy for this strange race. He develops an emotional bond with the community, embraces their environmental-spiritual philosophy, and falls in love with Neytiri, the Pocahontas-like Na'vi princess. Thus, audiences cheer for Sully's relationship and want the Na'vi to defeat the American colonizers, happily watching the destruction of the people who most closely resemble themselves and their own material interests. The film's "green" message—that saving the planet and the Na'vi's special spirit tree is more important than increasing a company's bottom line—is effectively rendered through sentimental portrayals.

Because of its powerful emotional impact and the clear problem of colonialism that it points to—America's history of capitalist interests causes us to overlook or ignore the value of the people who occupy the territory to the point of distorting and destroying the native inhabitants—*Avatar* has the potential to be a revolutionary anti-colonization film as well. But it isn't. Because of the way in which *Avatar* side-steps race by portraying actual colonized peoples as fictional aliens—substituting blue people for red and black people—the film disrupts transference of sympathy to the historical groups the Na'vi represent. Furthermore, when Jake Sully is transferred into the body of a Na'vi, he literally colonizes that body. When audiences are cheering for Sully and the Na'vi, they are still cheering for themselves because they are cheering for a group that is led by what is essentially a white man—the same type of person who has been in charge for centuries. The Na'vi do not independently devise their own methods of self-preservation nor do their tribe members lead the group to victory. Their success is totally

dependent on the presence of Sully and his relationship with them. Thus, *Avatar* leaves intact the race and gender power structures that maintain inequality in America's past and present, even replicating the problems of the very colonial past it criticizes.

Contemporary sentimentalism is a powerful and complex mode that draws from a historical legacy and builds upon modern structures of thought and feeling. Despite continued public and critical resistance against its perceived feminine associations, sentimentalism enables authors to reach readers on an intimate level in ways that push them to make connections across social boundaries. As scholars and critical theorists continue to deconstruct associations between gender and the biological body, and as feminists continue to push against cultural validation of the masculine and de-validation of the feminine, the uses of sentimentalism will grow even more broad and complex. Sentimentalism as an ideal is about human connection, about forging sympathetic links between groups originally perceived as unalterably different in order to show that they are connected. However, sentimentalism is also about finding new ways to define social groups and determining who is ultimately in charge of making those designations. Let us hope that Morrison is right, and that by critiquing sentimentalism's foundational assumptions, new forms of sympathy that accept difference will emerge.

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