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THE POWER OF MULTIPLYING: REPRODUCTIVE CONTROL IN AMERICAN
CULTURE, 1850-1930

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By
Virginia Bucurel Engholm

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Jeffory Clymer, Professor of English

Lexington, Kentucky

2014

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

THE POWER OF MULTIPLYING: REPRODUCTIVE CONTROL IN AMERICAN CULTURE, 1850-1930

Prior to the advent of modern birth control beginning in the nineteenth century, the biological reproductive cycle of pregnancy, post-partum recovery, and nursing dominated women's adult years. The average birth rate per woman in 1800 was just over seven, but by 1900, that rate had fallen to just under than three and a half. The question that this dissertation explores is what cultural narratives about reproduction and reproductive control emerge in the wake of this demographic shift. What's at stake in a woman's decision to reproduce, for herself, her family, her nation? How do women, and society, control birth?

In order to explore these questions, this dissertation broadens the very term "birth control" from the technological and medical mechanisms by which women limit or prevent conception and birth to a conception of "controlling birth," the societal and cultural processes that affect reproductive practices. This dissertation, then, constructs a cultural narrative of the process of controlling birth. Moving away from a focus on "negative birth control"—contraception, abortion, sterilization—the term "controlling birth" also applies to engineering or encouraging wanted or desired reproduction. While the chapters of this work often focus on traditional sites of birth control—contraceptives, abortion, and eugenics—they are not limited to those forms, uncovering previously hidden narratives of reproduction control. This new lens also reveals men's investment in these reproductive practices.

By focusing on a variety of cultural texts—advertisements, fictional novels, historical writings, medical texts, popular print, and film—this project aims to create a sense of how these cultural productions work together to construct narratives about sexuality, reproduction, and reproductive control. Relying heavily on a historicizing of these issues, my project shows how these texts—both fictional and nonfictional—create a rich and valid site from which to explore the development of narratives of sexuality and reproductive practices, as well as how these narratives connect to larger cultural narratives of race, class, and nation. The interdisciplinary nature of this inquiry highlights

the interrelationship between the literary productions of the nineteenth and twentieth century and American cultural history.

KEYWORDS: Reproduction, Birth Control, Sexuality, Abortion, Eugenics

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January 15, 2014

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THE POWER OF MULTIPLYING: REPRODUCTIVE CONTROL IN AMERICAN
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DEDICATED TO BOTH OF MY CHILDREN, HARRISON AND ANNIE

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The history of reproductive control is a complex tale reflecting the interests of two distinct factions: those pushing to control the reproductive capacity of others and those determined to control their own reproductive choices. The former have attempted to control the choices available to women, presuming the latter cannot intelligently and rationally choose for themselves.

Simone Caron, *Who Chooses?*

This breakdown of the history of reproductive control from Simone Caron's *Who Chooses? American Reproductive History Since 1830* offers the traditional critical view of the field of reproductive control, one that victimizes women and vilifies men. It pits men against women and imagines the history of reproduction as a zero sum game where one group's reproductive losses are another's gain. What this view fails to take into account is that reproductive control is a much more culturally fluid concept. It operates, not in a unilaterally and punitive fashion for women, but in a myriad of ways that are used by variety of groups for disparate purposes. This prevalent critical account fails to fully examine the larger societal forces at work in women's reproductive processes, ranging from men's own engagement in birth control practices to the way that women too could subvert the ideology and rhetoric of reproductive control to suit their own purposes.

In large part, the emergence of modern birth control in the nineteenth century is a foundational historical development, leading to seismic shifts in both the actual reproductive practices of women and in the ideological weight of reproductive control. During that century, technological advances, such as the invention of vulcanized rubber, allowed the widespread production of condoms and diaphragms, and the discovery of the ovulatory cycle and the invention of the curette greatly improved the safety of surgical abortions. This created a general population of women who were, more than they had

ever been in the past, able to control their reproductive rates.¹ The subsequent decline in the rate of reproduction of white, middle- and upper-class women in the nineteenth century speaks to this shift.² While the reproductive rate for these women at the turn of the nineteenth century was 7.04, that rate had fallen to 3.56 by the turn of the twentieth century, a decline of nearly half.³ In order for a population to experience a change in its reproductive rates of this magnitude and for that change to occur in less than a century, women must have been using birth control methods frequently and effectively.⁴

This emergence and successful application of birth control in the nineteenth century then led to a foundational shift in women's relationship to reproduction and made reproduction a hotly contested and ideologically fraught cultural site for society. Prior to the advent of modern birth control, the biological cycle of pregnancy, post-partum recovery, and nursing dominated women's adult years. Because the average birth rate per woman in 1800 was just over seven and given that the span of the reproductive cycle is two to four years, women were statistically likely to be engaged in the reproductive cycle during the entirety of their reproductive lives. On a global population level, the equation was simple—if you were a sexually active woman, as most married women are, then children would come with statistical regularity. This equation changed, though, when

¹ See Ch. 1 for a historical discussion of the rise of modern birth control and the use and prevalence of available methods of birth control.

² The trend occurred across a broader demographic segment than just middle- and upper-class white women. However, the decline was most drastic in this population, and given the dearth of research on other minority and ethnic groups' reproductive practices and uses of birth control, this dissertation limits claims about reproductive demographic trends to middle and upper-class white women, although clearly more research is very much needed on the reproductive practices of minority groups in the United States, including the African American population and immigrant groups.

³ Janet Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

⁴ There is some critical disagreement still about the role that voluntary abstinence played in reducing the birth rates effectively in the century, but most scholars generally concur that to so effectively reduce reproductive rates in such a small timespan, artificial methods of birth control were most likely employed by a significant number of women.

women began to be able to, with ever increasing certainty, manage their rate of reproduction. No longer at the mercy of Mother Nature, mothers could now choose how often they wanted to be pregnant, how many children they wanted, and how regularly they wanted to experience the reproductive cycle. The significance of the shift in reproductive rates cannot be overstated, not only for women personally but on a societal level. Reproducing on average only three to four times in their lifetimes meant that women could for much of their adult years *not* be engaged in reproduction. Rather than statistically spending most of their lives either pregnant, recovering from childbirth, or nursing and caring for an infant, women could have more years free to engage in a host of other activities and duties. Untying women from the tethers of their reproductive cycle opened the door for them to pursue other roles in the family and in society. In the home, with fewer children to care for, mothers could devote themselves more fully to each child, resulting in changes to our conception of childhood itself.⁵ With fewer children to care for and consequently fewer obligations in the home, women could, and did, take on new roles outside of the home, working, becoming educated, and participating in civic and political life. Fathers too could, and did, begin to reimagine their own roles in the family, including taking a more direct role in childcare and the household. It is because of these changes that family life could shift to the nuclear version that came to dominate the twentieth century. Without a doubt, foundational shifts in society occurred because of the rise of modern birth control.

⁵ For a host of complex economic, sociological, and familial reasons, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century witnessed changes to the meaning and cultural value attached to childhood as a developmental state. Largely, our modern conception of childhood as a special developmental state separate from adulthood emerged during this time period, and the decrease in family size played a large part in this change. See Viviana Zelizer's *Pricing the Priceless Child* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) and Steven Mintz's *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004).

On the other hand, while “birth control” is arguably the most important tool that emerged in the nineteenth century to enable changes in family life and women’s roles, it has also led to a host of complicated ideological issues for women and for the rest of society. Once a woman could attain, with a reasonable degree of certainty, the ability to control the rate at which she reproduced, she opened herself up for political and societal manipulation of this ability. The story of reproductive control in the twentieth century centers around these political and societal debates. As Leslie Reagan points out, “Over the course of the twentieth century, Americans have moved from focusing on the problems of reproduction overall to treating each conception as a singular and significant event. The victories of the public-health movement and feminist reproductive-rights movements together reduced the danger of child-bearing in the United States and increasingly make pregnancy and childbearing a choice rather than a mandate” (Reagan, “From Hazard to Blessing to Tragedy” 370). For Reagan, the movement of reproductive history has been towards an understanding that “reproduction is controllable” (370). However, the knowledge that reproduction is controllable consequently poses the question: who controls it?

Prior to the advent of modern birth control, the only real avenue open to society to control birth was either the sanctioning or endorsing of some sexual practices—like sex within marriage or even the culturally sanctioned sexual coercion of slave women to increase slave populations—or the prohibiting of sexual activity. Beyond that, though, for individual women, whether or not to reproduce was not a real question, because there were no viable alternatives for sexually active women.⁶

⁶ Voluntary motherhood, a term which emerged in the nineteenth century and was used to denote suffragists and women’s rights advocates’ view that women should have the unilateral right to refuse her

It was only once reproduction could be controlled that the issues of who should reproduce, how often, and what the ramifications of those choices meant for their family, husbands, selves, and society began to emerge. It was only when reproduction became a choice, not a biological given, that it became a politically and ideologically fraught concept. The question that this dissertation aims to answer, then, is who controls reproduction and to what end? Who gets to decide who reproduces? How often? For what purposes? In other words, who gets to control birth?

In order to explore who controls reproduction, it is necessary to broaden the very term “birth control.” Scholars and historians of reproduction typically use the term “birth control” to denote the technological and medical mechanisms by which women limit or prevent pregnancies. Historical and cultural analysis of birth control generally fall into one of three categories: the technological and medical histories of contraception and abortion; the profiles of prominent historical and cultural figures of the birth control movements; or the narratives of birth control as a “social issue and social movement” (Gordon xii). Simon Caron’s work, which “traces the emergence of contraception and abortion as social, medical, and legal issues” and examines three sites of reproductive control—abortion, contraception, and sterilization—serves as a typical example (2). Janet Brodie’s foundational text *Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth-Century America* explores the rapid decline in the reproductive rate of women in nineteenth century by examining their access to, and knowledge of, particular forms of contraceptives. Linda Gordon focuses on the emergence of a cultural separation of sex from reproduction necessary for large-scale use of birth control. Several works, including James Mohr’s

husband’s sexual advances, offered women limited reproductive control only through abstinence. See Linda Gordon’s *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Rights: Birth Control in America* (New York: Penguin, 1990) for a useful discussion of the sexual and reproductive politics of the voluntary motherhood movement.

Abortion in America, Marvin Olasky's *Abortion Rites: A Social History of Abortion in America*, and Kristen Luker's *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* focus on a particularly culturally contentious form of reproductive control—abortion—and explore the ways that conflicts within the medical, societal, and religious communities have made abortion the site of cultural and ideological conflicts of reproduction. More recent works have continued this trend. Angela Franks' *Margaret Sanger's Eugenic Legacy: The Control of Female Fertility* explores the question of how current contraceptive practices emerged out of such anti-women's policies as forced sterilization and eugenically-driven agendas. Lara Marks's recent work *Sexual Chemistry: A History of the Contraceptive Pill* and Elaine Tyler May's *America and the Pill* examines the pharmacological, medical, and cultural history of the birth control pill.

While these works have been extremely important to uncovering the cultural and historical narratives of birth control, and to legitimizing reproductive studies as a culturally significant site of critical inquiry, my project moves from the use of the term “birth control” to the use of the term “controlling birth,” which includes any force at work on women that seeks to either encourage, channel, facilitate, prevent, or limit birth. In other words, rather than seeing birth control in purely medical and physical terms, the story of controlling birth is about the political, cultural, and societal forces at work on reproductive practices. Fundamentally, the term “birth control” refers to the products that limit or prevent birth, while the term “controlling birth” refers to the societal and cultural processes that affect reproductive practices. Birth control, then, is the medical, physical, and personal means that one takes to limit progeny; controlling birth is the psychosocial, cultural, and political means that are used to either encourage or prevent the reproductive

processes of women. Creating a distinction between the terms “birth control” and “controlling birth” helps to articulate what is at stake in my project. Controlling birth, then, becomes a form of societal control that seeks to channel reproduction for its own purpose, whether that purpose is limiting the reproduction of less desirable groups, or exerting cultural pressure on reproductively “desirable” women to reproduce, or creating cultural narratives about pregnancy, motherhood, and fatherhood that seek to encourage reproduction, or constructing reproductive rhetoric that makes reproduction either a “duty” or a “choice.”

This dissertation is interested in the process of controlling birth, which is not exclusively concerned with the use of contraceptive products or medical procedures, but is also interested analyzing the ongoing cultural processes of controlling birth that can and do affect reproductive practices. It is important to understand that while birth control as a term is almost universally used in association with what could be termed “negative birth control,” the prevention of birth—contraception, abortion, sterilization are, after all, medical items and procedures that prevent birth—the term “controlling birth” does not simply mean the prevention of unwanted conception or pregnancy. The control of birth can also be applied positively, by the means of engineering or encouraging wanted or desired reproduction. For us to truly understand the complete history of birth control, we have to look at both sides of this coin, although historically, much of the critical attention has been focused on the preventative side of controlling birth. Expanding the term, then, allows me to explore narratives of reproduction and reproductive control that might previously have been overlooked. While the chapters of this work often center around traditional sites of birth control—contraceptives, abortion, and eugenics—they are not

limited to those forms. Instead, I seek out all forms of cultural and literary narratives that in some way aim to control reproduction, and in looking at other forms of controlling birth beyond contraceptives and birth control, my dissertation uncovers hidden narratives of controlling birth.

Women, as a part of society and not simply outside of or subject to it, are then part of this process of controlling birth, not just the victims of it. As such, women could, and actively did, engage in controlling birth. Contrary to other historical narratives of birth control, women were often able to integrate such reproductive practices and the use of birth control with traditional gender norms and expectations. But this new lens of controlling birth also reveals how men, traditionally seen as removed from the concerns of birth control, could engage in controlling birth as a means of either encouraging or discouraging the reproductive practices of women, as well as shows how the practices of controlling birth could act upon men's lives and choices. As a term for understanding the complex political stakes of intervention in reproductive practices, "controlling birth" serves as a much more fruitful than "birth control."

By focusing on a variety of cultural texts—advertisements, fictional novels, historical writings, medical texts, popular print, and film—this project aims to create a sense of how these cultural productions work together to construct narratives about sexuality, reproduction, and reproductive control. Relying heavily on a historicizing of these issues, my project shows how these texts—both fictional and nonfictional—create a rich and valid site from which to explore the development of narratives of sexuality and reproductive practices, as well as how these narratives connect to larger cultural narratives of race, class, and nation. This methodology is indebted to several recent

works, in particular Beth Widmaier Capo's *Textual Contraception: Birth Control and Modern American Fiction*, that operate under the understanding that fictional accounts, because of their ability to both reflect and mold cultural views and attitudes, serve as an excellent way to explore the cultural forces at work in the circulation of ideas in society. The interdisciplinary nature of this inquiry highlights the interrelationship between the literary productions of the nineteenth and twentieth century and American cultural history.

Chapter 1: Sexual Agency, Birth Control, and "Passionlessness"

By examining the rise of modern birth control in the nineteenth century and by historicizing that development within medical narratives of women's bodies and reproductive knowledge, this chapter explores the confusing, and often contradictory, medical views of the female body and its relationship to physical health, reproductive health, and sexual desire and procreation. I explore how the cultural dictates for women in the nineteenth century were fundamentally in conflict and how this conflict actually opened the door for greater sexual agency and reproductive choice control for women. An analysis of the rhetorical logic of birth control advertisements reveals the way "birth control" products permitted greater sexual agency for women, not simply because of the practical prevention of pregnancy or birth, but because of the advertisers focus on reproductive control as a matter of health, not sex. This logic creates a cultural space for the use of birth control, while the medical and societal focus on women's natural "passionlessness" provides a rationale for their declining procreation. Ultimately, the chapter argues that the supposedly restrictive medical view of the female body in the

nineteenth century and its innate “passionlessness” actually functioned in a way that allowed, rather than precluded, greater sexual agency and reproductive control for women.

Chapter 2: Dysgenic Reproduction and Sexual “Containment”

This chapter provides an analysis of the little-known novel *The Island Neighbors* (1871) by Antoinette Brown Blackwell, a prominent women’s rights activist, amateur scientist, and eugenics supporter. Blackwell’s text serves the important purpose of offering an early fictive example of the emerging eugenics movement where *The Island Neighbors* acts as a fictive “laboratory” for Blackwell to imagine both a dysgenic reproductive problem and a social-containment solution. Featuring the story of a wealthy Boston family and their dysgenic maid’s summer trip to an idyllic island retreat, the novel explores themes of reproductive control and eugenics by presenting the reader with the potential, and clearly undesirable, sexual union of Margaret, the maid, with a local island sailor. The novel circumvents the problems of dysgenic reproduction by ending with a resolution about sexual containment, requiring that the couple remain on the island where they are free to reproduce but unable to infect the greater society with their dysgenic reproduction. Like the sexologists of the late nineteenth century, Blackwell hoped for a “modification of lust by love...as a slow ‘evolutionary’ process” whereby “the instincts of individual self-preservation [would be] eventually modified by the social instincts.” In other words, *The Island Neighbors* presents the hope that individual self-preservation would lead to self-imposed reproductive quarantine for the good of the

social body. The chapter argues that this early eugenic narrative connects reproductive control to larger cultural fears of containment and contagion.

Chapter 3: Choice, Duty, and Sexual Shame

Chapter 3 traces the shift from the rhetoric of “duty” to the rhetoric of “choice” in imagining women’s reproductive practices. Operating from the assertion that greater access to birth control in the nineteenth century resulted in the promise of greater sexual freedom for women, the societal recasting of reproduction as a “choice” allowed women to feel that they retained their ability to manage their reproduction freely. Of course, because this movement from duty to choice emerged from within already established cultural narratives—namely, narratives of class, race, sexuality, and gender—the actual ability to freely make reproductive choices is a social construction that is every bit as prescriptive as the earlier narrative about duty was. As two Progressive-era cultural texts, Edith Wharton’s *Summer* and the 1917 anti-abortion film *Where Are My Children* that depict abortion as a matter of choice reveal, this new rhetoric offered the illusion of freedom and personal agency while at the same time encoding those reproductive choices with gendered, racialized, class-based tropes. Choice, then, became a subversive way for eugenic advocates to press their reproductive agendas at the expense of reproductive freedom. Reproductive “choice” in abortion was then cast in what modern readers will recognize as familiar, gendered tropes—that of the choice to be a “selfish woman” or a “good girl.” The chapter argues that sexual shame functioned in the absence of notions of reproductive “duty” to circumscribe women’s reproductive choices. In doing so, the chapter makes a key contribution to an understanding of how controlling birth goes

beyond an understanding of the particular birth control methods available to women and reaches for an understanding of how the rhetoric surrounding those birth control methods affect women's ability to choose.

Chapter 4: Paternal Longing, Fathers, and Reproductive Control

This chapter traces the emergence of the “new father” in the nineteenth and early twentieth century in order to explore how this new version of fatherhood, and the related cultural depiction of paternal longing, functioned as a form of reproductive control. The chapter reveals that this shift emerged from within the gendered politics of reproductive control and that paternal longing, combined with the increase in the father's involvement in the daily care of children, emerge out of a culture alarmed by women's lack of “natural” maternal desire and motivation to reproduce. The former consisted of an emotional appeal to women to engage in reproduction, whereas the latter served as a practical appeal. Given that the popular culture depicted, usually negatively, this new father as the result of women's lack of maternal desire and investment in reproduction, it clearly seems to have been imagined as a way to address perceived problems in the reproduction rates of women and the decline of the American family. If society wanted to encourage their (reluctant) women to reproduce, then a “new father,” one who longed for offspring and who was willing to be an active and involved partner in raising them, would seem to help mitigate the reasons women could voice for limiting, postponing, or opting out completely from having children.

An analysis of a series of columns devoted to fathers in *Parents Magazine* that ran from 1932 to 1937 reveals how this rhetoric of the “new father” can be read as a form of

controlling the reproductive practices of women. By reimagining the father and moving away from the “tyrant” father of old to a new, involved father, both emotionally and practically, in the lives of his children, society could reconstruct parenthood as a joint effort, thereby further reducing the burdens of childcare for women. Because this new father was often placed in contrast to the women reluctant to reproduce, this new paternal figure clearly seems to have been imagined as a solution to the problem of women’s lack of maternal desire.

The Power of Multiplying

By examining of the narratives of controlling birth in American culture, I uncover a new narrative of reproduction that addresses the question of who’s controlling birth in American society. This new narrative shows that as women gained control over their own reproduction, various societal, cultural, and political forces attempted to control birth for purposes that served the perceived societal good or their own subversive societal agendas. Reproductive control intersected with already established narratives of class, race, gender, and nation, often in surprising and unexpected ways, and attempts to control birth ranged from medical to authoritative to emotional. Through it all, reproduction remains a contested site of cultural power struggles, although the terms of the debate, the desired outcomes, and the methods used have changed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Controlling birth ultimately reveals, as Theodore Roosevelt terms it, the “power of multiplying” (qtd. in Dryer 124).

Chapter 2: “Peculiar Functional Interruptions:” The Rhetorical Logic of Birth Control Advertisements in the Mid-Nineteenth Century and “Unnatural” Motherhood

In E.D.E.N. Southworth’s mid-nineteenth century sentimental novel *The Hidden Hand*, Traverse, an upstanding youth devotedly in love with Clara, goes to see her protective, loving father Doctor Day to ask for her hand in marriage. The doctor’s concern with the marriage, though, is strangely not with whether or not Clara should marry Traverse (this he has already accepted) but with at what age should she marry. He asserts, “My child is but seventeen” and although “she will do anything in conscience that you ask her to do,” he asks him to wait until she is at least twenty to marry (228). His concern is for her health. He states,

No girl can marry before she is twenty without serious risk of life, and almost certain loss of health and beauty; that so many do so is one reason why there are such numbers of sickly and faded young wives. If Clara’s constitution should be broken down by prematurely assuming cares and burdens of matrimony, you would be as unfortunate in having a sickly wife, as she would be in losing her health. (228)

Traverse, in turn, assures the doctor that his “affection for Clara is so pure and so constant, as well as so confiding in her faith and so solicitous for her good,” that he can wait until she is physically ready to be married (228).

This brief moment from a popular mid-nineteenth century novel provides a clear point of entry into the complex nineteenth century discourse over women’s physical health, reproduction, and sexuality. In the story, Doctor Day’s concern over his daughter’s physical health manifests itself as a concern about her reproductive health. The Doctor’s fears that his daughter taking on the “burdens of matrimony” prematurely would result in a “certain loss of health” and perhaps even “serious risk of life” clearly

allude to concerns about the physical dangers of childbirth for women, and with good reason, given the high rates of maternal mortality in childbirth in the nineteenth century.⁷

This acknowledgement of the physical risks of childbirth for women opens the door for a reexamination of the primacy of the cultural dictate for motherhood in sentimental culture. The nineteenth century witnessed the rise of the Cult of True Womanhood, a cornerstone of which was the veneration of motherhood.⁸ Critics have tended to focus on this aspect of true womanhood, and particularly the degree to which these tenets placed restrictions on women, without fully exploring how the very tenets of femininity were fundamentally in conflict and how these conflicts opened the door for women to have access to the kind of sexual agency and reproductive control that they appeared to preclude.⁹ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg have argued that “men [...] employed medical and biological arguments to rationalize traditional sex roles as rooted inevitably and irreversibly in the prescriptions of anatomy and physiology”

⁷ Maternal mortality rates did not begin to significantly fall until the 1930s or 40s, with the advancing of the germ theory and the resulting changes in hygiene and sanitation. Prior to this point, childbirth all too often resulted in death or physical damage for women. See Judith Walzer Leavitt and Whitney Walton’s “‘Down to Death’s Door:’ Women’s Perceptions of Childbirth in America” for a discussion of women’s attitudes towards childbirth (*Women and Health in America: Historical Readings* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999)).

⁸ Barbara Welter’s foundational essay defines the Cult of True Womanhood as piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg describes it as having “prescribed a female role bounded by kitchen and nursery, overlaid with piety and purity, and crowned with subservience.” (*Disorderly Conduct*, 13). Even in Smith-Rosenberg’s figuration of it, the conflict between it being bounded by “kitchen and nursery” and yet “overlaid with piety and purity” is apparent.

⁹ Several critics and historians have argued convincingly for how the Cult of True Womanhood and dictates of femininity allowed women more social, moral, and political agency but few have examined how the tenets themselves created a conflict in sexual identity that conversely opened the door for greater, not less, sexual agency and reproductive control.

(12). Simone Caron has argued a similar point about women's ability to control their own reproduction:

The history of reproductive control is a complex tale reflecting the interests of two distinct factions: those pushing to control the reproductive capacity of others and those determined to control their own reproductive choices. The former have attempted to control the choices available to women, presuming the latter cannot intelligently and rationally choose for themselves. (2)

However, this argument, and the concurrent focus on the way the "men" used physiological arguments to perpetuate "traditional sex roles," fails to take into account how the conflict between a dictate for women to be sexually "passionless" and a call for women to be mothers opens up a subversive cultural space for women, one that actually allows women to explore the limits of their sexual and reproductive agencies. I argue that critics fail to sufficiently recognize the inherent conflict between decorous anorgasmia and fecundity, one which allowed for, rather than precluded, greater access to sexual agency and reproductive control for women.

I further argue that an analysis of the rhetorical logic of birth control advertisements reveals the way that these products permitted greater sexual agency for women, not simply because of the practical aspect of the use of birth control, but because of the advertisers' focus on reproductive control as a matter of health, rather than sex. This logic created a cultural space for the use birth control, while the medical and societal focus on women's natural "passionlessness" provided a rationale for their declining procreation. As a result, if women did not have children in as great of numbers as women had had them in the past, it could be assumed that this was the result of their "natural" passionlessness and not because of their use of birth control products. In other words, passionlessness could function as a moral screen for the "immoral" use of birth

control by allowing women to seem virtuous in the lack of, or limited, production of offspring.

The confusing, and often contradictory, medical views of the female body and the relationship between physical health, reproductive health, and sexual desire and procreation aided in creating this conflict. The medical community, despite its ideological opposition to birth control products, actually helped create a rhetoric of the female body and female sexuality that purveyors of contraceptives could capitalize on as justification for using their products. Advertisers of birth control products managed to create a subversive view of the female body that posited pregnancy as “unnatural,” allowing women even greater ability to control their procreativity.

This chapter will describe how the medical view of women’s sexuality and reproduction and the contradictions inherent within the Cult of True Womanhood provided women in the nineteenth century with a means of managing their reproduction. Whereas previously women had been largely at the mercy of their reproductive practices, several factors, including the rise in birth control knowledge and products, the medical community’s view of women’s sexuality and reproductive health, and the rise of passionlessness as a central virtue of womanhood, came together in the mid-nineteenth century and allowed women to assert greater control over their reproduction.

The argument for this chapter, then, is threefold: first, that the medical discourse over women’s health, sexuality, and reproduction ironically presented pregnancy as an unnatural state for women’s bodies; second, that the cultural dictates of decorous anagasmia, or passionlessness, and the primacy of motherhood were in conflict, and third, that purveyors of birth control products could capitalize on these two discourses

(one medical, one moral) to create a moral screen that permitted the use birth control products and still allowed women to seemingly remain within the realm of “proper” womanhood.

The Rise of Modern Birth Control

One of the most profound and significant demographic shifts of the nineteenth century was the decline in the reproductive rates of native-born, white middle class women. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the birth rate for these women was 7.04 (Brodie). By the turn of the twentieth, that rate had fallen to 3.56, a decline of nearly half. This precipitous drop in reproduction had far ranging effects on society, and historians have tied it to a range of factors, from the changing value of children as productive members of a household to the more modern view of them as “priceless,” to the growing women’s rights movement and controversy over women’s roles, and from status in nineteenth century society, to the eugenic and anti-immigrations movements of the latter part of the century. Other discussions consider to what extent this decline is reflected in other populations, particularly the working class, immigrants, and ethnic groups. While all of these historical factors are certainly relevant in discussing the birth rate’s decline, this chapter is less focused on what socioeconomic and demographic factors led to this decline and more focused on how to understand this decline within the terms of the nineteenth century Cult of True Womanhood.¹⁰ In other words, if the

¹⁰ While most probably the rise of birth control knowledge and its use provided the “how” of the decreased reproductive rates of white, middle-class women, the why is a bit more complicated. One significant socio-economic factor for this decline was that with the move from an agricultural/productive family unit to urban/consumptive family unit, children became, for middle class families, economic liabilities rather than assets. Whereas in previous centuries, more children meant more hands to work the family farm or business, in the nineteenth century, the rise of the priceless child and the emphasis on childrearing rather than childbearing made children costly, time and labor-intensive members of the

message of motherhood was as culturally dominant as has been thought, how do we make sense of such a dramatic demographic shift that seems to prove otherwise?

What is clear is that the technical answer to how this decline occurred can be found in the rise of the knowledge and use of birth control in the nineteenth century. The notion that nineteenth century couples achieved this decline in birth rate predominantly through sexual abstinence seems, in the face of growing historical inquiry, increasingly more a product of outdated views of Victorian sexuality than of any genuine historical evidence.¹¹ Clearly, to effectively decrease the rates of reproduction by nearly half in one century, couples were practicing some form of birth control beyond simple abstinence. Indeed, over the course of the nineteenth century, public discussion of contraception increased significantly. In fact, the rise of the modern birth control movement can be traced to 1831, with the publishing of two significant works on contraception: Dr. Charles Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy*, also titled *The Private Companion of Young Married People*, and Robert Dale Owens's *Moral Philosophy*. Knowlton's book contained the most comprehensive medical information on contraception of its time and also advocated for family planning. Demonstrating that this rise of birth control knowledge was not uncontested, Knowlton was tried for disseminating immoral materials

household, particularly with the increasing delayed onset of adulthood and the rising cost of education. It simply no longer made economic sense for middle-class families to have a large number of children, and in fact, it made sustaining a middle-class lifestyle significantly more difficult. For perhaps the first time in American history, the number of children had an inverse relationship to the acquisition of wealth. On the other hand, having fewer children was politically and socially advantageous for women. Women could devote themselves more fully to the now greatly expanded demands of childrearing, with the particular Republican Mother goal of raising pious future citizens, and also have more time to devote to social and moral causes such as abolitionism, temperance, health and medical reform, and woman's rights movements. See Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg's *Domestic Revolutions*, Viviana Zelizer's *Pricing the Priceless Child*, and Carl Degler's *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* for a discussion of these factors that led to the changing family norms for middle class families in the nineteenth century.

¹¹ Janet Brodie notes that contrary to the notion that nineteenth century couples limited fertility through sexual abstinence, her research indicates that sexual intimacy was a valued part of marriage.

and spent time in jail for his work. And yet despite this Puritanical reaction to Knowlton's work, the public tide had turned. In the decades after Knowlton and Owens published their works, public lectures on birth control practices became common, dozens of pamphlets and books on contraception were published, and the number and types of birth control products increased immensely.¹²

Prior to the nineteenth century, the major methods of contraception were limited to coitus interruptus, abortion, and prolonged lactation. The nineteenth century, however, witnessed a rise in reproductive technology with the invention, and increased use, of douching, vaginal sponges, cervical caps, vaginal diaphragms, and condoms. For some of these products, dating their origins is somewhat difficult. For example, the invention of the first actual diaphragm is generally attributed to German physician Wilhelm Peter Mensinga, although American versions of this product can be traced to patents in the 1840s and were generally circulating in advertisements by the 1850s. These cervical caps, or "womb veils" as they were called, could actually be traced even further back to German practices of midwives in rural farming communities at the turn of the century. This difficulty in tracing the exact origins of these contraceptive products indicates a key aspect of birth control culture: often the knowledge and use of birth control existed in the shadowy background of women's lives, passed down between women and regulated by the female midwives who ministered to their "female" needs. This oral culture of knowledge began to change in the nineteenth century, though, as birth control came out of the woman's closet and into the public sphere of medical discourse and advertisers. In

¹² Brodie's *Contraception and Abortion*, James Mohr's *Abortion in America*, and Leslie Reagan's *When Abortion Was a Crime* provide extensive discussions of the history of contraceptives in America, including discussions of the proliferation of birth control products in the nineteenth century and increasing regulation of their dissemination and use.

fact, Janet Brodie notes that knowledge of birth control practices was sometimes recorded in family bibles or cookbooks, a clear indication of contraception's movement from the whispered words to the written practices of women.

This dramatic decline in birthrate combined with the increase in types of, and available knowledge about, reproductive technologies clearly indicate that women used reproductive control practices to limit progeny. The three major methods of reproductive control in the nineteenth century shifted to coitus interruptus, or withdrawal, which continued to be popular, douching syringes, made more easily and inexpensively with the vulcanization of rubber in 1844, and the rhythm method, which was introduced in the 1840s with the discovery of the ovulatory cycle.¹³ Other methods resulting from advances in science and medicine such as condoms, mass produced for the first time in the 1840s, intrauterine devices (IUDs), which were made out of wood, rubber, and metal, and pharmaceutical contraceptives such as sponges, suppositories, spermicides, and chemically coated tampons were also common. The number and type of these products increased exponentially throughout the nineteenth century, as did women's knowledge of them through increases in public lectures and pamphlets or tracts on birth control products, as well as through advertisements in print mediums.¹⁴

Sex, Passion, and Motherhood

The significant increase in the use of contraceptives occurred alongside the rise of the Republican Mother and a dramatic increase in the veneration of motherhood. Carroll

¹³ Jill Matus's *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1995).

¹⁴ See Jill Matus's *Unstable Bodies*, Linda Gordon's *The Moral Property of Women*, Lana Thompson's *The Wandering Womb*, and Brodie's *Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth Century America* for a discussion of birth control technologies and practices in the nineteenth century.

Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg have noted that “motherhood was woman’s normal destiny, and those females who thwarted the promise immanent in their body’s design must expect to suffer” (13). It was woman’s job to “fulfill her ordained role as mother of numerous and healthy offspring” (187). This argument, while having held critical sway for quite some time, fails in some ways to recognize the complexities of the dictates of womanhood for sentimental culture, as well as the demographic realities of the failing birthrate. While the reverence of motherhood as the highest state of womanhood in some ways became fetishized in the nineteenth century, this fetishization did not operate in a unilateral and punitive fashion, or, in other words, solely by society placing expectations on women and imposing sanctions against those who failed to live up to their roles. As many feminist critics have noted, women, and the women’s rights groups who advocated and spoke for them, were often active agents in the fetishization of motherhood because it allowed them greater access to societal influence and legitimated their role in society.

Despite the political and social gains this fetishization allowed, I argue that the belief in women’s “natural” lack of sexual desire complicated this call for fecundity by exposing the inherent tension between these two gender expectations. The relationship between sex and passion in the process of reproduction is central to understanding these conflicting views of femininity. Passionlessness has long been viewed as a cornerstone of Victorian femininity. This view of women’s utter lack of sexual drive or desire is perhaps best represented by Dr. William Acton’s claim in his work *Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs* that “the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind” (qtd. in D’Emilio and Freedman

79). Critical debate over whether or not this view is actually representative of the medical view of women's sexuality at the time and of women's actual lived experiences serves the important purpose of exploring the historical truth about views of women's sexual practices in the nineteenth century. Nancy Cott, who coined the term "passionlessness" to describe the lack of sexual desire or passion advocated for these women, describes the term as representing the shift from "a traditionally dominant Anglo-American definition of women as *especially* sexual which was reversed and transformed between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries into the view that women (although still primarily identified by their female gender) were *less* carnal and lustful than men" (57).

Carl Degler provides counter-evidence of physicians and advice writers who did not conform to the view that women were essentially lacking in sexual desire. He asserts that these texts "suggest, at the very least, that there was a sharp difference of medical opinion, rather than a consensus, on the nature of women's sexual feelings and needs" (1467). In fact, he points out, "There is some reason to believe, as we shall see, that the so-called Victorian conception of women's sexuality was more of an ideology seeking to be established than the prevalent view of practices of even middle-class women, especially as there is a substantial amount of nineteenth-century writing about women that assumes the existence of strong sexual feelings in women" (1473). His claim that passionlessness represents more of an ideology about sexuality than the historical practices of real women, however, helps to underscore my argument about the rhetorical, rather than descriptive, role that this idea played in the culture. Although preachers and physicians alike used the idea of women's lack of sexual desire descriptively, in reality

the dictate seems to have functioned more prescriptively. But unlike Degler, I do not view the prescriptive nature as in any way lessening Cott's argument about the importance of passionlessness in the culture. Instead, the very prescriptiveness of the dictate means that the idea of passionlessness carried a great deal of ideological weight. As such, it could be used as a weapon of moralization, as other historians have pointed out, but it could also be put to other, more subversive purposes.

One such purpose arises from the fact that passionlessness creates a contradiction for a culture that also fetishized motherhood and viewed women's proper and primary roles as mothers. The medical discovery of ovulation in 1843, and the related discovery that female "heat" or passion was not needed for reproduction, perhaps indicates that women increasingly in the nineteenth century could be seen as fecund and not sexual. As Jill Matus points out, though, even after the discovery of ovulation, medical texts continued to argue that ovulation and fecundation resulted from female sexual excitement. The biomedical discovery of ovulation "laid the framework for a doctrine of female passionlessness and passivity" but "that doctrine was by no means orthodox or representative during the Victorian period" (Matus 43). To indicate just how contentious and ideologically fraught the relationship between passion and fecundity was, Dr. Thomas Kay writes in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1891, almost fifty years after the discovery of ovulation, that prostitutes could avoid pregnancy by not becoming sexually aroused during intercourse. He gave an example of a married woman who controlled her body's reaction to disease by not "allowing her passions to be aroused" (Thompson 131).¹⁵ Women who were fecund, then, risked being seen as

¹⁵ Jill Matus argues for a view of Victorian sexuality as a "vexed" category. She asserts that "according to the Foucauldian view that sexuality is constituted through representation, biomedical

succumbing to “female heat” and “allowing her passions to be aroused,” associating them with common prostitutes, and those able to control their bodies did so by controlling their passions. Clearly, within the medical community, the debate over whether or not reproduction resulted from sexual passion continued well into the twentieth century.¹⁶

In fact, the debate preceded the nineteenth century as well. The female orgasm, writes Donald Symons, “inspires interest, debate, polemics, ideology, technical manuals, and scientific and popular literature solely because it is so often absent.” Perhaps one of the most enduring of these debates, at least within the medical community prior to the twentieth century, was the question of whether female orgasm was instrumental for reproduction. In fact, ancient physicians’ primary concern, if they happened to discuss the female orgasm at all, was with whether it was necessary for conception.¹⁷ The history

literature is an important participant in constructing what we have come to understand by Victorian sexuality. To pursue Foucault’s terms we would say that sexuality is never logically prior to its written representations; however much it is represented as natural—a matter of biological fact—sexuality belongs to culture, and its history is thus the history of its discourses. Recent explorations of the narratives of reproductive biology have shown how scientific representations of sex are deployed ideologically and how the grounding of sexual difference in ostensibly natural facts both reflects and serves ideologies of gender”(22). As a result, “conflicting and sometimes contradictory formulations make up the discursive history of reproductive biology”(23). Contrary to the notion of reproduction and pregnancy in the nineteenth century as fixed and stable (because of the primacy we give passionlessness as a cultural dictate for women) scientific depictions of reproduction were ideologically caught up in debates over women’s sexuality.

¹⁶ In fact, the debate over whether or not menstruation was connected to ovulation continued throughout the nineteenth century. As late as the 1890s, the medical community was still debating whether the exact purpose of the menstrual cycle, whether it was related to ovulation, or whether the uterus was an independent organ that performed the menstrual function without external aid, generally thought to be the effect of the moon on the female body. Some doctors, influenced by Victorian disgust at the sexual and reproductive processes, still believed menstruation to be pathological. As these make clear, little concrete knowledge existed about the exact nature of the female reproductive processes, and much remained open for ideological debate. See Vern Bullough and Martha Voght, “Women, Menstruation, and Nineteenth-Century Medicine,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 47 (1973): 66-82, for a thorough discussion of nineteenth-century medical views of menstruation and reproductive processes.

¹⁷ Greek philosopher Aetius believed that a “certain tremor” was necessary for conception while Soranus viewed female sexual desire, rather than orgasm, as the prerequisite condition for conception. Medieval physicians held that nothing was necessary beyond male ejaculation, and in Tudor and Stuart England, thought that not only was female orgasm necessary for conception to occur, but that sexual arousal in women without the accompanying release of orgasm was unhealthful, as it caused an imbalance in the humors since the blood rushed to the sexual orgasms during arousal and would remain there without orgasm. It was thought that female orgasm caused contractions that released the blood back into the

of scientific views of female orgasm also shows a continued concern with the relationship between female sexual desire and health. Prior to the nineteenth century, physicians advanced the idea that women's physical health was connected to her sexual desire, arguing for either a positive or negative relationship. Some doctors, such as Ambroise Pate, expressed the view in 1634 that women with strong sexual desires and healthy appetites were less likely to experience imbalance of the systems since their humors flowed more freely. Other doctors held that an excess of sexual desire was detrimental to the woman's overall health and reproductive potential. As Abraham Zacuto argued in 1637, excessive sexual desire "is a dreadful and odious ailment, for it interferes with intercourse and conception" (qtd. in Maines 53). As Rachel Maines notes, "Relief from unhealthful congestion was ... a standard refrain in medical discussions of the importance of orgasm to both men and women" (53). While physicians of the Renaissance and later may have had moral and ideological reservations about the female orgasm, particularly those produced through clitoral stimulation, they nonetheless felt that unreleased sexual desire was unhealthful for both men and women.

This view changed, though, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the medical community embraced the view of women as innately lacking in sexual desire. This medical view of female sexual desire emerged because of a belief that women either "enjoyed intercourse sufficiently with or without the resolution now medically defined as orgasm, or that normal women experienced no sexual feelings at all" (Maines 59). The famous nineteenth century physician Richard von Krafft-Ebing, in a stunningly revealing

circulation of the body, restoring balance to the body's humors. For a discussion of the medical history of orgasm and its relationship to reproduction, see Thompson's *Wandering Womb* and Maine's *Technology of Orgasm*.

expression of this view, wrote, “Woman, however, when physically and mentally normal and properly educated, has but little sensual desire. If it were otherwise, marriage and family life would be empty words” (qtd. in Maines 55). The belief in women’s sexual frigidity and complete lack of sexual interest was popular both medically and culturally in the nineteenth century and was not limited to single, unmarried women. As Rachel Maines puts it, “Physicians, popular culture, and even some feminists attempted in the nineteenth century to establish decorous anorgasmia as a normal, even desirable, feminine trait” (66). Many critics have rightly argued that this view held certain benefits for women, particularly with the dangers of pregnancy and all its potential complications and risks. Nancy Cott, as well as John D’Emilio, Estelle Freedman, and others, have argued that the view of women’s passionlessness offered women moral authority and granted them some power within sexual relationships to refuse sexual advances on moral grounds. Beyond the sexual realm, this added moral authority gave women access to greater social and political influence. Even further, historians have noted how the dictate of passionlessness could aid women in limiting family size by giving them this moral authority to refuse sexual relations with their husbands, a practice that nineteenth century feminists embraced as “voluntary motherhood.”

Pregnancy as “Unnatural”

Passionlessness alone does not fully explain women’s newfound ability to control her reproductive practices. Women needed to combine their supposed passionlessness with a medical reason for managing their reproduction. They found this reason in the way that the medical community approached their reproductive health. Doctors used the

language of disease and degeneration when talking about the dangers of contraception.¹⁸ Generally, the emerging, male-dominated medical community of the nineteenth century was opposed to birth control for a variety of professionally, socially, and politically motivated reasons, and these denouncements largely took the forms of medical expertise and knowledge. As late as the end of the nineteenth century, doctors continued to advocate the view that birth control was medically ineffective, despite the demographic evidence to the contrary. H.S. Pomeroy, a doctor writing in 1888 of these issues, represents the typical medical view:

It is surprising to what an extent the laity believe that medical science knows how to control the birth-rate. Just here let me say that I know of but one prescription which is both safe and sure—namely, *that the sexes shall remain apart*. So thoroughly do I believe this to be a secret which Nature has kept to herself, that I should be inclined to question the ability or the honesty of any one professing to understand it so as to be able safely and surely to regulate the matter of reproduction. (qtd. in Gordon 106)

This view, though, was more the result of moral and political views than the result of “science” and was certainly connected to the dispute between the growing professionalized medical community and midwives and popular health movements over who would have dominion over women’s bodies. In fact, despite the fact that for centuries, women’s reproductive health was seen as the purview of female midwives, increasingly, the professional medical establishment began to lay claim to doctor’s right to minister to the female body. Birth control, in this scenario, represented both the threat of the non-professional medical community, which professional doctors increasingly

¹⁸ See James Reed “Doctors, Birth Control, and Social Values, 1830-1870,” *The Therapeutic Revolution: Essays in the Social History of Human Medicine*, ed. Morris Vogel and Charles Rosenberg, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), Brodie’s *Contraception and Abortion*, and Mohr’s *Abortion in America* for a discussion of the medical community’s complex views of contraceptives and abortion.

represented as charlatans and quacks who often sold the birth control products and instructed on the use of such items, and the threat of women's own control over their bodies and reproductive processes. Neither of which were seen as advantageous for the growing professional medical community.

Many doctors thought that the use of contraception led to permanent sterility and referred to birth control as "onanism," or fruitless intercourse resulting "wasting seed" (Gordon 106). Women who engaged in reproductive control practices were called "legitimate prostitutes" or were considered to engage in "marital masturbation." In a particularly condemning 1893 anti-abortion tract, Abbot Kinney wrote, "Sexual intercourse, unhallowed by the creation of the child, is lust...wife without children is a mere sewer to pass off the unfruitful and degraded passions and lust of one man" (Gordon 11).

Adding to this sense of the medical community's conflation of sexual excesses with the physical health of the body was the medical view of women's health as fundamentally connected to her reproductive health. Victorian medical texts viewed the ovaries as "the workshop of generation" and held that "it is on account of the ovaries that women is what she is" (Matus 32). As Smith-Rosenberg puts it, for doctors, "those aspects of woman's physiology that were uniquely female—menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, and menopause, as well as a host of gynecological diseases—determined all of a woman's other physical and social experiences" and caused male physicians to view women as "dominated by their reproductive processes" (23). One mid-century physician asserted that "Woman's reproductive organs are pre-eminent" because "they exercise a controlling influence upon her entire system, and entail upon her

many painful and dangerous diseases. They are the source of her peculiarities, the centre of her sympathies, and the seat of her diseases. Everything that is peculiar to her, springs from her sexual organization” (qtd. in Smith-Rosenberg 184). Women’s reproductive health and all of its “peculiarities” were seen as the source of her overall physical health.

Even her sexual “health” had grave implications for her physical well being. “Excessive” sexuality in women was considered a disease.¹⁹ John Harvey Kellogg, best known as the inventor of Kellogg’s Corn Flakes, ran a nineteenth century sanitarium in Michigan where he attempted to “cure” men and women of unhealthy excessive sexual desire. In writing on the dangers of masturbation for both sexes, he asserted that “the dangers [of masturbation] were terrible to behold, since genital excitement produced intense congestion and led to urethral irritation, enlarged prostate in males, bladder and kidney infection, priapism, piles and prolapse of the rectum, atrophy of the testes, varicocele, nocturnal emissions, and general exhaustion” (qtd. in Thompson 136). While the nineteenth century medical community was convinced of the dangers of masturbation for either sex, for women, whose overall health was thought to be dependent on their reproductive health, the consequences of sexual excesses were cause for even graver concern. For example, Dr. Baker Brown’s book *Surgical Diseases of Women* advocated the idea that masturbation was the main cause of female insanity. Similarly, Dr. Hollick thought that an enlarged clitoris could “degenerate into gangrene, fungus, or cancer” (Hollick 604). Any sexual violation of a women’s body, which usually referred to masturbation, particularly at the outset of puberty, had grave repercussions for her later physical health. One physician noted of female puberty,

¹⁹ Excessive sexual passion was medically considered unhealthful for both sexes, but I have chosen to focus on the particular way that the medical community viewed excessive sexuality in women as a degeneration and disease.

It is now that every hidden germ of disease is ready to spring up; and there is scarcely a disorder to which the young and growing female is subjected, which is not at this occasionally to be seen, and very often in fatal form. . . Coughs become consumptive and scrofula exerts its utmost influence in the constitution and deforms the figure of the body. . . The dimensions of that bony outlet of the female frame is also altered and diminished on which so much of the safety and comparative ease depends in childbirth. This, indeed, is the cause of almost every distressing and fatal labor that occurs and it is at this period of life [puberty] . . . that such an unspeakable misfortune may be prevented. (Smith-Rosenberg 187)

Here, the “hidden germ of disease” that threatens to “spring up” shows how sexuality itself was seen as the manifestation of some hidden disease in the female body, which affected both her physical health (coughs and consumption, physical deformations of the body, etc.), as well as her reproductive health (the threat of “distressing and fatal labor”). Clearly, the moral dictate for decorous anorgasmia was literally for a woman’s own good.

This medical view of the female body and the connection between reproductive and physical health shows the extent to which mid-nineteenth century rhetoric about the body, particularly as it related to sexuality, imagined it as an organism that represented a self-regulating system, i.e. a system that must maintain equilibrium within itself to preserve health and order, a notion based in the belief of the dangers of the “excess” on health. This was particularly important in matters of health and sexual relations. Writers of advice literature advocated strongly for self-regulation of the body’s systems and “inundated America with the message that bodily well-being required that individuals practice sexual self-control” (D’Emilio and Freedman 72). These writers based their view of sexual activity on the prevalent notion in the scientific community that the body represented a “closed energy system” and, as such, its resources were depleted by each use. Excessive sexuality, they argued, posed a physical danger to the health of the system and, therefore, the overall health and well-being of the individual. If, as Smith-

Rosenberg asserts, doctors viewed women's bodies as containing "only a limited amount of energy—energy needed for the full development of her uterus and ovaries," any activities that depleted the resources of the female system were seen as harmful (187).

This argument was most commonly put forth to men, whose depletion of resources was physically manifested after each sex act in a way that a woman's was not and was typified by the conception of "spermatic control." Historians point out that men were encouraged to control their baser sexual natures, not only to properly conserve their own sexual system, but also to control over-indulgence of sexual activity on their wives. As one advice writer put it,

Many a man who would have been a good husband if he had only known how, and who would not for his life, much less a momentary pleasure if afforded, have endangered the health, or hazarded the happiness of a well-beloved wife, has destroyed her health, happiness and life (some men several wives successively) by excessive sexual indulgence. (qtd. in Walters 82)

Women, however, were in some ways at even greater risk of physical harm from the dangers of sexual health, given the fact that the overall health of their bodies was seen as so dependent upon their reproductive and sexual health. As a result, writers advocated for the exercising of male sexual self-control to prevent the negative results of over-indulgence in sexual practices for women.

Even further, the medical uncertainty about the line between abortion and miscarriage raised further questions about exactly how to regulate the female system. During the early nineteenth century, little distinction was made between abortion and contraception, and the exact status of abortion in the nineteenth century currently continues to be a subject of critical debate. Generally, at least in the early part of the century, abortion itself, as long as it was prior to quickening, was not considered a legal

issue.²⁰ In fact, when it occurred before quickening, abortion was often medically seen as miscarriage, or the body's "natural expulsion of the fetus" (Burns, *Observations on Abortion*). As Simone Caron explains, "Physicians and the public alike generally did not believe pregnancy could be confirmed during the first trimester. Many women and their doctors assumed the absence of the menstrual cycle could result from a blockage as much as from pregnancy" (16). That the source of the "blockage" could result from either pregnancy or from some other physical disruption of the women's reproductive systems meant that doctors, and society, could not adequately distinguish between a medically-necessary inducement of menses and an abortion. As a result, doctors felt that "the health of the woman depended on the secretion of the womb, and it is consequently of great importance that this should be corrected whenever any derangement as to quantity or quality may occur" (Gaston 459-60). The "secretion of the womb" referred to here is of course menstruation, but the logic of the sentiment indicates that any absence in "quality" or "quantity" of menses is a "derangement" of the system necessitating "correction." In alluding to the continued debate over the nature of public sentiment about abortion, historian Cornelia Hughes Dayton points out that "abortion attempts were far from rare" but "outrage over the destruction of the fetus or denunciations of those

²⁰ James Mohr's foundational work *Abortion in America* sets the terms for the current debate over the history of abortion in America. Mohr puts forth the view that the nineteenth-century anti-abortion campaign was a historical aberration that resulted from the American Medical Association's crusade to criminalize abortion to serve its own professional advancement. Since Mohr, scholars have discussed the history of abortion often within Mohr's term, either to support or refute them. Marvin Olasky's *Abortion Rites: A Social History of Abortion in America* refutes several of Mohr's central premises, predominantly the idea that prior to the nineteenth century there was no criminalizing of abortion, the argument in the nineteenth century abortion was mainstream and common, and the view of AMA as a "politically conscious organization." See also Leslie Regan's *When Abortion Was a Crime* and Simon Caron's *Who Chooses?* for a discussion on the popular morality of abortion in the nineteenth century and for the role quickening played in determining pregnancy.

who would arrest ‘nature’s proper course’” were “strikingly absent.”²¹ Perhaps the reason that these denunciations were “strikingly absent” was the very confusion over whether early abortion *was* abortion or whether it was a “natural,” or even medically-induced but necessary return to menses. In other words, given the lack of concrete medical knowledge of the fetus in early pregnancy in the nineteenth century, doctors could hardly be faulted for ministering to their female patients who complained of “interrupted” or “blocked” menses and who perhaps were in some physical and/or emotional distress. It is not surprising, given this indistinguishable line between a lack of orderly functioning of the menstrual cycle because of pregnancy or some other unknown “blockage,” that restoring the “order of the system,” if that is what the patient so desired, would be seen in medical, and not moral, terms.

Given this medical confusion over pregnancy and harmful obstructions of the female system, it is not surprising that purveyors of contraceptive and abortifacient products capitalized on the ironic medical construction of pregnancy as an “unnatural” state for women to advertise their wares. If pregnancy was seen as a possibly “unnatural” state for women, then women could control pregnancy under the guise of “regulating” their systems while remaining virtuous, “true” women. This allowed birth control

²¹ Henry C. Wright put forth the first feminist argument for abortion in *The Unwelcome Child* (1858). He argued that abortion was an unfortunate, but necessary, result of the excessive sexual demands that husbands made on their wives. His view mirrored those of the woman’s right movements. Elizabeth Cady Stanton argued that the growing number of abortions was a result of the “degradation of women” at the hands of their male partners. While feminists of the nineteenth century could understand what drove women to abort, they did not condone it and hoped that marriage reform would erase the need for abortion. They even opposed contraception on the grounds that it allowed men access to sex both inside and outside of marriage without any of the repercussions of their sexual demands. They did, however, advocate for “Voluntary Motherhood,” the feminist slogan for women’s control of their reproduction that involved only engaging in sexual activity when the intended consequence was reproduction. It is not difficult to see why their mode of reproductive control was not as popular as some others. See Andrea Tone’s *Controlling Reproduction*, (Wilmington: SR Books, 1997).

products to hide behind the medicalization of pregnancy and the male biomedical view of women's reproductive processes—menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause—as possible sources of diseases and derangements of women's biological systems in order to permit women to control their reproductive practices without entering into the contentious world of feminist socio-political ideology.

Pregnancy as Obstruction

Advertisers of birth control products, then, could capitalize on the fears of “derangement” of the female system, as well as the medical discourse surrounding the female body that viewed any disruption of the reproductive processes or threats to reproductive health as threats to women's overall physical health, by depicting their products as merely offering a “cure” for the obstructions that plagued women's reproductive systems, whatever the cause of such obstructions. Despite the view that the “medical vision of women's physiology and sexuality served to reinforce a conservative view of women's social and domestic roles,” (Smith-Rosenberg 23) a rhetorical analysis of advertisements of contraceptives reveals how a particular discourse, even if its intent is restrictive or repressive in nature, can be subversively repurposed to serve the agenda of other, competing interests. The medicalizing of the Cult of True Womanhood aided in the construction of this alternate agenda. Purveyors of birth control products manipulated medical language of disease and the female body in order to serve their own agendas—to sell their products. That they offered women a moral screen for regulating reproduction was a byproduct of the rhetorical logic that they used to do so.

In fact, the print advertisements for these products relied on a complex, codified set of language practices to both incorporate the biomedical view of menses into their pitch for their products and to shield themselves from public outcry about the exact nature of their services they offered. An ad for a product that is not aimed specifically at curing reproductive illness helps to show how the pervasive language and rhetoric of disease is an integral part of these practices (see figure 1).

The Cause of Disease.

Nearly all classes of disease are caused by some obstructions in the system which prevent the regular and wholesome operations of the animal functions. This state of the system, is disease, which is manifested in a variety of forms, more or less malignant in their character. To restore the system to a state of health, then, it is only necessary to remove the cause of disease, and the end is accomplished. The cause is obstruction somewhere. This can be removed by purgation, which is the only means that should be resorted to, because suggested by reason, and by nature. **Dr. HARLICH'S STRENGTHENING AND GERMAN APERIENT PILLS** are allowed by the thousands that have used them, to be the best purgative medicine in existence. Because they not only remove all obstructions, and purge the system of its impurities, but because, and which is extremely important, strengthen and give proper tone to the stomach, and produce a healthy action of all the parts. Besides, they are so mild and gentle in their operation, as to render them at all times a perfectly safe and desirable remedy. The afflicted would do well, then, to purchase a box or two of this invaluable medicine, and give it a fair trial, instead of destroying their systems with oft repeated doses of Calomel, and other drugs, so injurious to human life and happiness.

Figure 1: The Cause of Disease. *Weekly Messenger*. Sept. 7, 1842. APS.

This 1842 ad from the *Weekly Messenger* highlights the rhetorical logic of general advertisements for medical products prevalent at the time—that the body is subject to obstructions that prevent the orderly operations of the system and that the cure is the removal of said obstruction. The ad reveals a significant part of the rhetorical logic of medicinal products in the mid-nineteenth century—that disease itself was simply an

obstruction or blockage that could be cured by removal. In other words, these advertisements essentially depicted the body as an orderly system that became blocked by the obstruction of disease.

An analysis of the language of birth control advertisements reveals that these advertisements operated under the same logic. Although some historians have noted that these ads employed a sort of rhetorical code to describe the processes of pregnancy and menstruation in order to mask the true nature of their products, none has analyzed the rhetoric of the ads themselves.²² By the 1860's, advertisements for over twenty-five different chemical abortifacients could be found in newspapers, periodicals, and pharmacies (D'Emilio and Freedman 63). These products were often advertised as "cures" for "obstructed menses" or "interrupted menstruation," and they operated rhetorically within the space between abnormal functioning of the female system due to disease, which necessitated medical intervention, usually in the form of a medically-induced miscarriage or abortion, and the normal absence of menstruation due to pregnancy. Indeed the popular periodicals of the time featured ads that offered to cure "suppressed menses," (*New York Daily Times*, Oct. 16, 1851) "suppression, irregularity, or retention of the menses," (*Philanthropist*, Aug. 13, 1839) and the "the irregularities, suppressions and obstructions of Nature" (*New York Times*, Nov. 25, 1862).

These products, then, clearly aim to control reproduction predominantly by acting as abortifacients and inducing miscarriage while posing these actions as simply a reestablishing of the healthful order of the system by stopping the "unnatural" and unhealthy cessation of menses. By positing the pregnancy as an "obstruction," they

²² See D'Emilio and Freedman for a discussion of the prevalence of these types of advertisements and their use of code language to describe their product's purpose.

associate it with the obstruction that the earlier ad claimed was the cause of disease and that must be purged in order to restore to the system to health.

Other ads make this connection even more clearly. An analysis of ads specifically marketed as cures for reproductive health reveals both how similar these particular advertisements are to the earlier one promising only to cure “disease” and how closely these ads rely on the medical rhetoric of reproduction, as well as the biomedical view of women’s overall health as at the mercy of their reproductive health.

Dr. Geissner’s Menstrual Pills (see figure 2 on next page) claim to be “most astonishing in their effects in reaching and removing the various irregularities, suppressions, and obstructions of Nature.” Many of these types of advertisements of contraceptives, while still using the terminology of disease of the other ads, replace the term “menses” with the term “Nature,” thereby further highlighting the extent to which women’s physiological system, their “natural” internal order, was equated with their sexual reproductive organs and the way that this equation firmly connected the physical reality of pregnancy with the diseased body that must be cured. In addition, the ad indicates the blurred line between products that act as traditional forms of birth control and those that act as abortifacients, as it, in addition to its claim to “reach” and “remove” the “suppression” or “obstruction” of Nature, also promises to “act like a charm...never failing to afford relief, and always successful as a preventative.” In effect, the product claims to both remove and prevent menstrual obstructions, or to either induce miscarriage, to act as an abortifacient, or prevent pregnancy in the first place.

MOST IMPORTANT TO THE LADIES.—DR. GEISSNER'S celebrated **MENSTRUAL PILLS** are most astonishing in their effects in reaching and removing the various irregularities, suppressions and obstructions of Nature.

Specially adapted for females, they act like a charm—so gently and mildly, and yet so invariably efficaciously, never failing to afford relief, and always successful as a preventive.

Married ladies will find particular instructions in the directions, in which are stated the various symptoms by which the causes of the suppression may be determined, as well as advice of the utmost importance.

Price One Dollar per box, containing explicit directions.

Each box will be signed by Dr. R. G. Geissner.

Sold at Nos. 38, 306, 386, 525 and 584 Grand-st.; 144 and 225 Spring-st.; 111 and 722 Houston-st.; 152 and 278 Greenwich-st., New-York; and at Apothecaries' Hall, Elizabethtown, New-Jersey.

All orders are to be addressed to Dr. R. G. GEISSNER, No. 127½ Liberty-st., New-York City, or to Box No. 2456 New-York Post Office, and a box will be sent by return mail.

Figure 2: Dr. Geissner's Menstrual Pills. *New York Daily Times*. Aug. 18, 1855. APS.

Other ads go even further in associating women's physical health with the maintenance of regulatory systems. The Compound Vegetable Systematic Pills (see figure 3 on next page) are advertised as "strong cathartic or purgative pills" that act as a "deobstruent" agent for the female reproductive system. These pills "are recommended in almost all complaints which Females are subject to, such an [sic] obstructions of customary evacuations." By referring to the "obstructions of customary evacuations," it of course references the evacuation that occurs during a woman's menstrual cycle, an evacuation that of course does not occur when obstructed by pregnancy. Consequently, while men's evacuations during sexual intercourse are considered hazardous to the physical health of their system, the menstrual evacuation of women here is put in conflict with the obstruction that is pregnancy, which is figured as posing the greater physical

harm. For women, then, it is the *lack* of the evacuation of their system that poses the physical threat to their overall health. Pregnancy, then, by definition could be seen as an unhealthy lack of evacuation of the female reproductive body, thereby posing the threat of physical harm to women. The rhetorical logic of these ads, then, can be seen as participating in a construction of pregnancy as unnatural.

COMPOUND VEGETABLE SYSTEMATIC PILLS.

PREPARED by A. STEWART. Which under the divine blessing have been the means of restoring to health and activity many persons suffering various diseases, completely given over by physicians.

1. *Strong Cathartic or Purgative Pills.*—They are useful in almost every complaint where Cathartics are necessary, and they are perfectly safe in all conditions of ill health when it is necessary to clear the Primæ Viæ or Stomach and Bowels of its superfluous matter and to prepare for the use of the other Pills recommended for the complaint. They are a certain and immediate remedy for the Terentia or Worms and all sudden attacks of Bilious and Colic complaints. These Pills do not interfere with the ordinary occupations of the patient.

2. *Mild Cathartic and Aperient Pills.*—These Pills are recommended in most cases after a few doses of No 1. They are a certain remedy for Indigestion, Dyspepsia, Jaundice and all Bilious complaints, loss of appetite, Headache and Piles.

3. *Mild Aperient, Disobstruent or Female Pills.*—These are recommended in almost all complaints which Females are subject to, such as obstructions of customary evacuations and all nervous affections, sick Headache, pain and palpitation of the heart and breast, Weakness, Debility, Dyspepsia, Flatulency, Costiveness, Inflammations, Stranguary and indeed all complaints incident to the human fræo. They are perfectly harmless, and may be taken in all cases and all stages; they will neither hinder business neither hinder business nor amusement and will, if persisted in, prevent and carry off numerous complaints, which are daily sending many of our fairest and worthiest of creation to an untimely grave.

4. *Ulcers, Consumptive, Alterative Pills.*—These Pills are designed for Consumptive complaints in all their different stages, and may be taken with perfect safety; they act altogether as an alterative. The same kind of Pills have twice saved my life in consumption, when every thing was prepared for my funeral except the coffin; to these and to Pill No 2, I owe my present wonderful recovery from a complication of diseases accompanied with ulcers of

Figure 3: Compound Vegetable Systematic Pills. *Boston Masonic Mirror*, Jan. 18, 1834. APS

Even while participating in the biomedical discourse of women’s reproductive physical health, these ads also acknowledge the effect of this suppression of menses on women’s emotional health. Some ads, while perhaps more obtuse in their meaning, are more evocative of the emotional dangers involved for women when suffering from “peculiar functional interruptions” (see figure 4 on the next page). Radway’s Ready Relief, although not specifically marketing a contraceptive product, assures that “ladies find it a present help for the debility occasioned by miscarriage and for the tortures they

suffer from peculiar functional interruptions.” While this ad seems aimed at women suffering from the “debility” of miscarriage, among other assorted ailments, the language used in reference to the “tortures” that they endure from “peculiar functional interruptions” indicates an awareness of the advertising rhetoric of birth control products. It evokes the language of obstruction and blockage so prevalent in the birth control product ads, and the reference to the “tortures” seems to clearly indicate both the physical maladies and the emotional distress induced by unwanted pregnancy.

R.	R.	R.
THE TRUE MEANS TO PRESERVE AND RECOVER HEALTH.		
LET THE SICK READ AND REFLECT.		
<p>RADWAY'S READY RELIEF checks all diseases arising from cold and unwholesome weather. To take it at this season is to put on defensive armor against Rheumatism, Fever and Ague, Lumbago, Neuralgia, Sore Throat, Colic, and all other complaints caused and aggravated by cold and damp. The suddenness with which it arrests these disorders is a phenomenon in medication. For all pain, however excruciating, it is an instantaneous remedy. Ladies find it a present help for the debility occasioned by miscarriage, and for the tortures they suffer from peculiar functional interruptions. Applied externally it reduces the inflammation of burns, cuts, scalds, bruises, sprains, &c., and gives immediate relief to the sufferer.</p>		
LOOK OUT FOR THE PESTILENCE.		
<p>In cases of Small Pox, Scarlet Fever, Measles, Putrid Sore Throat and Diphtheria, if Radway's Ready Relief and Regulating Pills are resorted to in the early attacks of those diseases, no danger need be apprehended. They will break up and exterminate every vestige of the disease in forty-eight hours. Radway's Ready Relief will, under all circumstances, prevent pitting of the face in cases of Small Pox. If Radway's Ready Relief and Regulating Pills are used daily when either of the above-named diseases prevail as an epidemic, they will surely protect all who use them against attacks. Radway's Ready Relief will cure Croup when all other medicines fail.</p>		
Radway's Remedies are sold by druggists everywhere.		
RADWAY & CO., No. 23 John-st., N. Y.		

Figure 4: Radway's Ready Relief. *New York Times*, Oct. 22, 1860. APS

In fact, beginning in the 1860s, the ads for birth control products began to evince simultaneously both more reticence and more openness in advertising their products, a move most probably brought on by the growing campaign against birth control products.²³

For example, Lyon's Periodical Drops (see figure 5 on next page) assures that they "cure all complaints incident to the sex, and remove all obstructions of nature, from whatever cause, producing health, vigor and strength." Further, "they cure all those ills to which the female system is subjected, with dispatch and a degree of certainty which nothing but a scientifically compounded fluid preparation could reach." In fact, they "guarantee...to cure Suppression of the Menses, from whatever cause." Like the previous ads, this example claims that it can "remove obstructions of nature" and is able "to cure Suppression of the Menses." It even references the rhetoric of restoring the order to the female system by asserting it can "cure all those ills to which the female system is subjected" and will restore "health, vigor and strength." Even more, it too blurs the line between preventing and ending pregnancy by claiming that the pills "are particularly adapted [to married women], as they bring the monthly period with such perfect regularity." Unlike the earlier ads, though, this example ends with a much more explicit statement of the pills' effect on the reproductive system of women by cautioning that "care should be taken to ascertain if pregnancy be the cause, as these DROPS [sic] would be sure to produce miscarriage, if taken whilst in that situation, and all are

²³ See Kristen Luker's *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) and Reagan's *When Abortion Was a Crime* for a discussion of the criminalization of abortion, and Nicole Beisel's *Imperiled innocents : Anthony Comstock and family reproduction in Victorian America*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) for a discussion of the Comstock Act and its affect on the dissemination of birth control products and literature.

cautioned against them, as I wish it distinctly understood that I do not hold myself responsible when used under such circumstances.” The addition of this last disclaimer, given the shared rhetoric of this type of ad with earlier ones, none of which give a similar warning, indicates that it is more a precaution against the growing legal complications resulting from selling birth control and abortifacient products than a genuine statement of the intended use of this product. In other words, the examination of the rhetoric of birth control ads reveals that this is in fact exactly the intended use of these products, a fact that women were well aware of, and that this caution is more a result of political and legal machinations than indicative of the true intent of the product’s user.

**TO THE LADIES
OF AMERICA,
LYON'S PERIODICAL DROPS,
LYON'S PERIODICAL DROPS,
THE GREAT FEMALE REMEDY
THE GREAT FEMALE REMEDY.
LYON'S PERIODICAL DROPS cure all complaints
incident to the sex, and remove all obstructions of nature,
from whatever cause, producing health, vigor and strength.**

LYON'S PERIODICAL DROPS are better than all pills, powders and nostrums; being a fluid preparation their action is direct and positive, and it needs nothing but good common sense to see and understand the reason why they cure all those ills to which the female system is subjected, with dispatch and a degree of certainty which nothing but a scientifically compounded fluid preparation could reach. They are, in the most obstinate cases,

**RELIABLE, AND SURE TO DO GOOD!
RELIABLE, AND SURE TO DO GOOD!**

**AND CANNOT DO HARM,
AND CANNOT DO HARM,**

To the most delicate constitutions.

LYON'S PERIODICAL DROPS will certainly produce the regular return of nature, if taken a day or two before the expected period, and it is a maxim in the profession, that prevention is better than cure.

LYON'S PERIODICAL DROPS have been used by over twenty-five thousand ladies, within the past six months, and the testimony of all is, "It surely cures."

CAUTION!! CAUTION!!

Bear in mind that I guarantee my DROPS TO CURE Suppression of the Menses, from whatever cause, though care should be taken to ascertain if pregnancy be the cause, as these DROPS would be sure to produce miscarriage, if taken whilst in that situation, and all are cautioned against using them, as I wish it distinctly understood that I do not hold myself responsible when

TO MARRIED LADIES

They are peculiarly adapted, as they bring the monthly period with such perfect regularity.

I could furnish any quantity of testimonials of its efficacy from my own patients, but the practice of parading bought and fictitious ones before the public is so prevalent, that I do not deem it advisable.

Do not suffer from these irregularities when an investment of one dollar in Lyon's Periodical Drops will regulate and restore nature to its healthy course; and

**DO NOT BE IMPOSED UPON!
DO NOT BE IMPOSED UPON!**

by those who have other preparations, which they desire to palm off upon the strength of the popularity of my Drops. But when the druggist you apply to has not got them; either make him buy them for you, or else inclose one dollar to the nearest general wholesale agent, who will return you a bottle by return express.

See that the name of Jno. L. Lyon is written upon the directions which are wrapped around each bottle. None others are genuine. Therefore, beware of counterfeits. They are for sale by every druggist in city and country, at one dollar (\$1) per bottle. If you wish relief, take no other.

Dr. JNO. L. LYON,
Practicing Physician, New-Haven, Conn.

Who can be consulted concerning all diseases, either personally or by letter.

C. G. CLARK & CO., New-Haven, Conn.,
General Agents for the United States and Canada.
DEMAS BARNES & CO., No. 21 Park-row,
F. C. WELLS & CO., Franklin-st.,
General Agents.

I have the above preparation in large or small quantities.

H. B. HELMBOLD,
No. 594 Broadway.

Figure 5: Lyon’s Periodical Drops. *New York Times*, Oct. 7, 1864. APS

In appealing to the female consumer in terms of the biomedical view of the female body, these birth control ads serve to illuminate a cultural view of the female body that imagined pregnancy as somehow outside of the natural state of a woman's biological system. The unnaturalness of pregnancy for women, while seemingly running counter to the long-held critical and cultural belief in the supremacy of women's roles as mothers in the nineteenth century, actually ties in with the more messy, nuanced problem that dictates of motherhood created for women in a culture whose perhaps only other greater cultural dictate was passionlessness. Because of the emphasis on passionlessness, in some respects, women could more easily adhere to the societal dictates about women's sexuality by not having children than by having them. The marketing of birth control products to women as cures for the unnatural state of pregnancy reveals how decorous anorgasmia actually served women's interest to an even greater extent than has been previously argued by showing how passionlessness served as a moral screen for the use of contraceptives. Advertisers of these products could wisely capitalize on this cultural conflict by using rhetoric that focused on the medically gray area between harmful obstructions of the female system and pregnancy, and in the process, advocated a view that made pregnancy "unnatural" for women, calling into question the very notion of "natural" motherhood.

This rhetoric surrounding the female body and women's sexuality in the mid-nineteenth century created an environment of confusing and conflicting societal dictates for women, which opened the door for advertisers of birth control products to exploit the medical view of women's health as dependent on their reproductive health in order to market their products as a solution to the "unnatural" problem of blocked menses, even

when the term “blocked menses” stood for pregnancy. Passionlessness, then, served as a moral shield for the use of contraceptives. In other words, these advertisements opened up a cultural space that made it possible for women to buy into the rhetoric of the birth control ads—meaning women weren’t ending or preventing pregnancy, they were simply availing themselves of medical treatments for their “blocked” systems—and then if nineteenth century women failed to have children with the same frequency as their mothers did, there was the confusion of medical views between women’s sexual arousal and pregnancy to blame. Women could therefore use contraceptives to limit or avoid pregnancy and yet appear simply to be the chaste and virtuous women society told them they should be, women who simply did not enjoy sex. It was no wonder they did not get pregnant.

The logic of the contraceptive ads allowed women to separate the regulating of their “system” from the regulating of reproduction. The former was a medical necessity, operating outside of the realm of issues of morality or threats to the patriarchal order. The latter was a dangerous, immoral, and potentially physically harmful practice that only libidinous women such as prostitutes engaged in, which threatened the very fabric of the social order and proved that such women were interested in sex for its own sake. These women clearly did not adhere to the standards of femininity of the culture. It is not surprising, then, that purveyors of birth control products relied on the former, not the latter, in constructing the rhetorical logic of their ads. And it is also not surprising that women seemed to believe them—if potentially only in pretense.

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Chapter 3: Dysgenic Problems, Eugenic Solutions: Antoinette Brown Blackwell's *The Island Neighbors*, Sexual Containment, and the Culture of Eugenic Thought in Nineteenth-Century America

As discussed in Chapter 1, the nineteenth century witnessed the birth of modern birth control. During that century, biomedical knowledge of the female reproductive system and advances in the science of contraceptives contributed to a general population of women who were increasingly better able to manage their reproductive processes, as evidenced by the drastic decline in the birth rate among white middle- and upper-class women. Controlling birth was no longer the unstable and uncertain process it had been historically. By the early twentieth century, through knowledgeable consumption choices, about which the mass media was all too happy to guide women, women could with a high degree of accuracy ensure their desired reproductive outcomes.²⁴

However, this reproductive freedom came at a perceived cost to the nation. Prior to the emergence of this ability to reliably control birth on population levels, society was not faced with questions of who could, or should, reproduce, and perhaps even more importantly, who should *not* reproduce. With the rise of modern birth control, though, reproduction became another societal tool with which to shape the face of a nation. Eugenics, then, can largely be seen as one of the first fully-fledged ideologies devoted to harnessing this new power of reproductive control. This chapter examines how an early fictive version of eugenics ideology in the nineteenth century reveals the emergence of the threat of dysgenic reproduction, and how one writer, eugenicist, and amateur scientist used the logic and rhetoric of contagion and containment to deal with this problem.

²⁴ For a discussion of the consumer choices and consumptive practices of birth control in the twentieth century, see Andrea Tone's *Devices and Desires* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

Antoinette Brown Blackwell, a prominent women's rights activist as well as the first female ordained minister in the United States,²⁵ serves as a particularly helpful figure with which to explore these narratives of sexuality, reproductive control, and eugenics. An avid amateur scientist, she was in fact the first female member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and she read widely from scientific texts, particularly Darwin and Herbert Spencer, publishing her own *Studies in General Science* in 1869 prior to writing *The Island Neighbors* (Cazden). Embracing the notion of the evolutionary nature of mankind, she nonetheless rejected Spencer's everyman-for-himself theory of human evolution in favor of a collaborative vision of societal advancement and progression through cooperation based on her religious and social justice values garnered from her work as a minister and advocate for women's rights and the poor. Through her overt interest in the science of eugenics in the late nineteenth century and her fictionalizing of a eugenic narrative in 1871 in writing her only novel *The Island Neighbors*, she helps us not only to relocate the origins of the eugenic movement in America several decades earlier than the beginning of the twentieth century when it is most commonly dated, but she also helps us to examine the differences between the early incarnation of eugenic thought and the later twentieth century eugenic movement.

While *The Island Neighbors* is a little known novel, it sits at the interesting intersection of the social justice and reform and feminism movements of the 1870s by

25 Biographer Elizabeth Cazden and theological historian Beverly Zink-Sawyer have pointed out the difficulty in making this claim because of the inconsistent application with which titles and designations were applied to ministers in the nineteenth century, particularly in sects such as the Quakers or in the case of itinerant preacher Sojourner Truth, making the first female ordained minister somewhat difficult to pinpoint. However, according to Zink-Sawyer, full-clerical ordination for a woman was unprecedented until Blackwell earned that distinction, given by the Congregational Church, in 1853. See Elizabeth Cazden, *Antoinette Brown Blackwell, a Biography*, (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1983) and Beverly Zink-Sawyer, *From Preachers to Suffragists: Woman's Rights and Religious Conviction in the Lives of Three Nineteenth-century American Clergywomen*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2003).

virtue of its author's social role as a late nineteenth century feminist reformer, combined with the emerging eugenics-based rhetoric of scientific and social-science communities. Perhaps what is most interesting—and significant—about the novel, though, is the way that the author's reform agenda seems to run counter to what actually occurs in the novel. In other words, while Blackwell seems to have written a populist novel that appeals to working class themes and issues based on her class sympathies as a reformer, the novel can easily be read as an early eugenic narrative that offers one imaginative solution to the problem of undesirable reproduction through the plot device of voluntary, self-imposed sexual and reproductive quarantine of the working class, and potentially dysgenic, couple on the titular island.²⁶

Blackwell's text serves the important purpose of offering an early narrative exploring the *possibility* of eugenic ideas in society.²⁷ Dominick La Capra argues that literary texts contain “variable uses of language that come to terms with—or ‘inscribe’—contexts in various ways...in an exchange with the past through a reading of texts” (127). I am interested in the particular way that the context of Blackwell's eugenic ideology is inscribed in her novel and, conversely, what this inscription can reveal about the emerging eugenic movement. Even further, Blackwell's novel, rather than depicting any actual, historical reality or “lived experience,” reveals how the dysgenic threat was *imagined*, an important distinction given the imagined nature of the threat in the first

²⁶ William Leach, one of the few critics to provide a reading of the novel, also comments on this apparent conflict between her apparent desire to expose the class pretensions of the wealth Boston family and her clear sympathies with them: “The island represents freedom, independence, health and sensuous fulfillment; Boston is sickness, class stratification, and repression. But, if we had to choose which of the two worlds meant more to [Blackwell], Boston would probably be the choice” (110).

²⁷ I am indebted here to Dominick La Capra's views on literature's “symbolic systems and signifying practices” in its role in the study of history (History and Criticism, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 118).

place. As Priscilla Wald writes about the contagion narrative, fictive accounts of the threats of contagion served as a powerful myth, “especially prevalent during times of rapid social transformation,” that sought to present social narratives as “established truth” (10). *The Island Neighbors*, then, serves as a fictive “laboratory” where Blackwell could imagine both a dysgenic problem and a social-containment solution.²⁸

Blackwell’s novel revolves around the potential, and eugenically undesirable, union of an island sailor and Margaret, the maid of a wealthy Bostonian family, who is visiting the summer retreat. Her smallpox scars, a visible reminder of the disease that once ravaged her body, also serve as a marker of her social unfitness. In this case, her social unfitness is evidenced by her wealthy employers’ obvious anxiety over her highly sexualized relationship with the island sailor. Margaret’s dysgenic status results from her diseased body, both in terms of its physical and its sexual shortcomings. On the surface, this may seem to demonstrate an essentialist element, but in truth, her marked face merely masks the class and racial concerns of the novel. According to the standards set by the Warners, her wealthy employers, and the larger society, in her body, status, and soul, Margaret was a wholly dysgenic figure.

The novel’s solution to the eugenic problems posed by Margaret’s partnering with the island sailor presents a rather surprising departure from the traditional eugenic narrative. Twentieth century eugenic thought focused on institutionalizing and sterilizing the “unfit.” But the novel displays a much different solution for nineteenth century

²⁸ I borrow this idea of literature as “laboratory” from Ann Rigney’s essay “Being an Improper Historian.” She describes the role of literature in historical study by stating, “The fascinating thing about imaginative literature is that it provides a laboratory where historically variable ways of seeing the world are expressed through the prism of poetical forms” (151). See *Manifestos for History*, ed. Sue Morgan, Keith Jenkins, Alan Munslow (New York: Routledge, 2007).

eugenicists. Unlike Henry Goddard's—the early twentieth century psychologist and eugenicist—claim that we should “hunt [the unfit] out in every possible place and take care of them, and see to it that they do not propagate,” the late nineteenth century's solution to the threat of the dysgenic as revealed by Blackwell's narrative was to isolate the problem, not expunge it, from society (271).²⁹

Blackwell's solution to the threat of dysgenic reproduction clearly draws on other prevalent scientific and social scientific ideologies of her time, particularly the twin notions of contagion and containment. Priscilla Wald writes of the ghettoization of urban immigrant communities in New York at the turn of the century that quarantine served as the model for dealing with the threat of contagion. Abraham Cahan's 1896 novel *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* and the 1928 landmark study *The Ghetto* by Louis Wirth indicate the influence of the quarantine model in the literature of contagion and “explained the appeal of the ghetto as a space for sociologists' inquiry: not only for what they could observe but also for what they could contain” (149). It offered “a reassuring tale of Americanization that features integration through containment: the preservation of social control through self-imposed quarantine” (150). We see these echoes of contagion fears and rhetoric in her treatment of the dysgenic reproductive threat in the text, as well as the solution of social containment through the “self-imposed” sexual and reproductive quarantine of the dysgenic couple.

²⁹ Priscilla Wald's work on contagion theory in the twentieth century speaks to the issues involved here as well. Her assertion that “disease emergence dramatizes the dilemma that inspires the most basic of human narratives: the necessity and danger of human contact” seems relevant to the novel's treatment of the intermingling of the contagion of disease with the social contagion of the islanders for the Warner's family circle (Wald 2). See *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

As a result, the novel ends with the couple remaining on the island, free to reproduce but unable to infect society with their dysgenic reproduction. The link between the nineteenth century ideology and the twentieth century movement can be found in Blackwell's version of social evolution. Margaret's choice of an "unworthy lover" and capitulation to feelings of passion and love over "duty" indicate that not only is she dysgenically unfit for reproduction, but that she also chooses to procreate unfitly anyway. Margaret and Alfred thus represent Blackwell's dysgenic nightmare: the unfit couple who refuse to engage in sexual self-control for the good of all and threaten Blackwell's belief in the ability of "all movements which combine the cooperative energies of many persons, and thus closely bind together the interests of the community" to "point to a new era of progress" (*Studies in General Science*, 333-334). Like the sexologists of the late nineteenth century, Blackwell hoped for "the modification of lust by love, of egotism by altruism, as a slow 'evolutionary' process" whereby "the instincts of individual self-preservation were eventually modified by the social instincts" (qtd. in Birkin 61). In other words, Blackwell hoped that individual self-preservation would lead to self-imposed sexual and reproductive quarantine for the good of the social body, and the narrative she creates is a sort of wish fulfillment that narratively isolates the dysgenic couple in order to offer a model for how to deal with the dysgenic threat.

The Island Neighbors, then, allows us to locate the roots of the eugenic movement in the nineteenth century, enabling us not only to better understand the origins of the movement, but also to connect nineteenth century concerns with reproducing "rightly" with the racism of the eugenic and xenophobic movements of the twentieth century. But if it is "warfare of the cradle," as eugenics advocate Theodore Roosevelt termed it,

Blackwell's novel offers an early Darwinian battle between individual self-preservation and social good (qtd. in Dryer 124). It is no wonder, then, having lost the battle against self-preservation, twentieth-century society took action against women who refused to reproduce "rightly."

The Emerging Culture of Eugenic Thought

Historians have generally located the beginning of the eugenics movement at the turn of the twentieth century. However, eugenic concern with the reproduction of the "best stock" can be traced back well into the nineteenth century. From Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Charlotte Perkins Gilman to John Noyes, the late nineteenth century is teeming with social and political figures who advocated eugenic ideologies in various forms, sharing the common concern of the over-reproduction of the undesirable other and the declining reproduction of the "best stock." If women were the (re)productive agents of society, if women were needed to produce citizens, this precipitous drop in reproductive rates among the "better class" of women threatened the very fabric of the country and opened the door to the threat of the "race suicide" of the old Puritan stock and the over-reproduction of the undesirable other. The eugenic narrative of America as engaged in a demographic war, exemplified by Roosevelt's reproductive battle cry of the "warfare of the cradle," had begun.

Several revisionary historians trace the origins of the eugenics movement, as a movement that influenced thought and social policy in the early twentieth century, to the nineteenth century's concern with the physical perfection of the body, the connection

between moral and physiological fitness, and the relating of these things to reproduction.³⁰ The term “eugenic,” which comes from the Greek words for *well* and *born*, was actually coined by Sir Francis Galton in 1883, well before the turn of the century and the rise of the Progressive Era with which the eugenic movement is so closely associated.³¹ As Nicole Rafter lays out in her work *Creating Born Criminals*, although the term eugenics was not generally used in the United States until the twentieth century, eugenic theory very much influenced and shaped late nineteenth-century cultural ideas and politics, as well as social and political practices. In fact, she asserts that the origins of American eugenics can be dated from around 1870,³² well before the turn-of-the-century start of the movement that is usually attributed to it.³³ Ronald Walters has also argued for tracing the eugenic timeline back into the nineteenth century and claims that although John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida community preceded the heyday of

³⁰ Dating the origins of eugenic ideology, however, continues to be a source of disagreement among historians. Even works such as Edwin Black’s *War Against the Weak*, (which traces eugenic thought well back into the mid-nineteenth century with the publishing of Herbert Spencer’s *Social Statistics*, which proposed that society followed natural and scientific laws, not God’s laws, and first used the term “survival of the fittest,” Darwin’s publishing of *The Origin of Species* in 1859; and Sir Frances Galton’s publishing of *Hereditary Genius* in 1869, in which he studied the genealogies of prominent and artistic families to argue that heredity transmitted, not only physical characteristics, but also emotional, intellectual, and creative ones as well, still locates the origin of the eugenic movement at the outset of the twentieth century.

³¹ Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into Its Laws and Consequences*, (London, Macmillan & Co, 1869).

³² This dating seems tied to the rise of Social Darwinism, the collection of scientific and philosophical works that came out in the decade or two prior which coalesced into the theory of Social Darwinism, the idea that Darwin’s scientific principles of evolution and competition in the natural world can and should be applied to human society.

³³ Lois Cuddy and Claire Roche, in their introduction to the collection *Evolution and Eugenics in American Literature and Culture, 1880-1940* (Lewisville PA: Bucknell University Press, 2003), argue that the large scale social, political, and cultural changes that occurred after the Civil War created an ideal environment for the emerging eugenics movement: “The pattern of social and cultural changes taking place after the Civil War created the opportunity for eugenicists to go public with their ideas and agenda. Specifically, the combination of urbanization, industrialization, and increasing secularization taking place between the Civil War and the Great Depression created the circumstances under which eugenics could prosper”(14).

the eugenics movement, they shared with it the central premise that the “best stock” should reproduce and “perfect the race” (151).

Writers and thinkers of the nineteenth century, concerned with the declining birth rate of white middle-class women and with the moral “fitness” of the women who were reproducing, created what I term a “culture of eugenic thought” that set the stage for the later twentieth century eugenic movement. This culture of eugenic thought differs from the later organized, eugenic movement, and Linda Gordon describes this difference by arguing that the “hereditarian thought” that emerged after the 1870s, which “had not yet distinguished accurately between heredity and nonhereditary characteristics,” was “associated with a social and political pessimism used to justify the miseries and inequalities of the status quo” and would later become the “self-conscious eugenics movement dedicated to maintaining the supremacy of the northern European-Americans” (76). It is this movement from thought to self-conscious movement that this chapter seeks to outline in order to examine both how eugenic movement was rooted in the culture of eugenic thought and to examine the differences in the way that this culture and this movement addressed the problem of dysgenic reproduction.

The culture of eugenic thought can be defined by three main tenets: first, a belief in the inseparable relationship between moral and physical fitness; second, a linking of physiological deficiencies with social and racial status founded on ethnocentric views of white supremacy; and third, a belief in both the deterioration of the race and the faith in the powers of “right” reproduction to address this problem. These tenets, expressed in nineteenth century cultural terms, would become the foundation for the ideology underpinning the twentieth century eugenic movement and lead to the assertion that

“‘indiscriminate survival’ gives way before that ‘rational selection and birth of the fit’ which is a fundamental condition of social well-being—the master spring to a rapid evolution of general happiness.”³⁴

One of the keystones of determining whose indiscriminate survival was undesirable for the larger social body can be found in the belief of the inseparableness of body and mind. An 1853 letter from Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Susan B. Anthony on marriage displays the connection between fitness of “mind and body” and the advancement of the white race:

Let them [the law makers] fine a woman fifty dollars for every child she conceives by a Drunkard. Women have no right to saddle the state with idiots to be supported by the public. Only look at the statistics of the idiot asylums, nearly all of the offspring of Drunkards. Women must be made to feel that the transmitting of immortal life is a most solemn responsible act and never should be allowed, except when the parents are in the highest condition of mind and body. Man in his lust has regulated this whole question of sexual intercourse long enough. Let the mother of mankind whose prerogative it is to set bound to his indulgence rouse up and give this whole question a thorough fearless examination... My letter... will call attention to that subject, and if by martyrdom I can advance my race one step I am ready for it. (Davis 212)

Her claim that “women have no right to saddle the state with idiots to be supported by the public” will become a central claim of the twentieth century eugenic movement, which focused less on positive eugenics, the attempt to increase the reproduction of the eugenically desirable, and more on negative eugenics, the prevention of the reproduction of the undesirable or unfit. In fact, that these women have “no right” to reproduce is exactly what the Supreme Court decrees in the 1927 decision allowing the forced sterilization of women on eugenically-motivated grounds.³⁵ In another letter (1866),

³⁴ Jane Hume Clapperton, *Vision of the Future, Based on the Application of Ethical Principles*, 1904, as cited in Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, xv.

³⁵ See *Buck v. Bell*, 274 U.S. 200, Supreme Court of the United States, 1927.

Stanton makes a perhaps even stronger eugenic statement when she unequivocally connects physical and moral deficiencies: “Hence, discord, despair, violence, crime, the blind, the deaf, the dumb, the idiot, the lunatic, the drunkard, all that was ‘inverted’ and must be so, until the mother of the race be made dictator in the social realm” (146).

Linking mental and physical ailments, Cady Stanton demonstrates the culture of eugenic thought with her revilement of the physiologically unfit, while confidently relying on the ability of the “the mother of the race” and social control to solve the problem.

This linking of moral and physical deficiencies proved especially useful for implicating undesirable others on the basis of anti-eugenic claims. As such, nineteenth century eugenic thought associated physiological deficiencies with social and racial status. Theodore Roosevelt, perhaps one of the most well known eugenic proponents of the twentieth century, began espousing eugenic views long before the turn of the century. According to historian Thomas Dryer, throughout the late nineteenth century, Roosevelt promoted the notion that immigration problems could be solved and nativism minimized if the breeding powers of the old-stock Americans remained strong enough to enable them to absorb the great masses of new people. As early as his 1880’s days as a representative in the New York Assembly, he espoused anti-Irish views and believed that Chinese immigration should be curtailed. Even more explicitly, according to a private letter written in 1887, Roosevelt had been distressed on a European voyage by some “noisy German Jews and diseased looking South Americans” (qtd. in Dryer 124).³⁶

³⁶ Alan Kraut terms this notion “medicalized nativism,” the idea that stigmatizing immigrant groups based on their perceived spreading of communicable diseases is justifiable. See *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes, and the “Immigrant Menace,”* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1994).

Again, we see the linking of anti-immigrant and ethnocentric views with physiological deficiencies, a hallmark of eugenic thought.

The eugenic beliefs in both the deterioration of the race and the faith in the powers of right reproduction to address this problem were often put in terms of the problem of the “best stock” reproducing. This concern with the reproduction of the “best stock” led to the race suicide fear of the late nineteenth century. Connecting the fear of race suicide to abortion, in 1868 a Michigan doctor wrote, “The destruction of fetuses [has become so] truly appalling [among native-born white American women that] the Puritanic blood of ’76 will be sparingly represented in the approaching century” (qtd. in Solinger 69). Theodore Roosevelt called this thinning of the “Puritanic blood” an “evil force” (qtd. in Dryer 127). As Rickie Solinger puts it, “In other words, abortion was dangerous because it thinned the population of Anglo-Saxon white people. Abortion risked the social future of the United States” (69). As a result, eugenic practices sought reproduction strategies that would increase the reproduction of the “fit,” or positive eugenics, and decrease the reproduction of the “unfit,” negative eugenics.

Theodore Roosevelt was one of the strongest and most influential proponents of the theory of race suicide, the idea that the “higher races” faced extinction if they failed to increase their reproduction. This theory masked the fear that the “higher races” would be overrun by the increasing numbers, both through immigration and reproduction, by the “inferior races,” and as a result, would run the risk of having their social power and control threatened. Roosevelt, like other proponents of the theory, saw “good breeders” as the solution to the problem. However, as Dryer asserts, Roosevelt’s view that “extreme fecundity” was not the solution, that only the increased reproduction of the

better classes would remedy the problem of race suicide, actually fits in better with nineteenth century eugenic thought, with its emphasis on positive eugenics and the increasing of the reproduction of the “right sort” of people, than with the twentieth century eugenic policies which emphasized negative eugenics and prevention of the reproduction of the undesirables. As Ronald Walters points out, even earlier than this, Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell argued that the reproduction by the physiologically and morally fit should become a “form of worship” and a “prop for national pride” (156). The linking of the physiologically and morally fit shows the extent to which “fitness” for reproduction involved not just the bodily and spiritual fitness of a person but also how those two categories were actually seen as virtually inseparable. In other words, to be physiologically fit was to be morally fit and vice versa. As William Leach puts it, “The physicality of the world was seen to mirror the moral law: one had only to study the physical universe or, more important, one’s own physiology, to discover the basis for true health, and therefore for true virtue” (20).

The Problem of Dysgenic Reproduction

These dynamics of nineteenth-century eugenic thought play out in Blackwell’s novel. Because in *The Island Neighbors* Margaret is physiologically unfit, as evinced by her face marred by the pox scars of disease, under the terms of nineteenth century eugenic thought, she is necessarily morally unfit, and this eugenic belief is validated in the novel by her “choosing” passion and romance over “duty.” She chooses to be, in Dale Bauer’s term, an “ugly girl,” a bad girl, fit for sex and not reproduction, and comes

to be equated with the “unfit.”³⁷ The term “unfit” came to describe those whose reproduction was considered culturally and socially undesirable. I apply the term to the character of Margaret because she carries the mark of disease in the form of her small-pox scarred face and because of the obvious societal concern, displayed most evidently by the Warners, her wealthy employers, over her highly sexualized relationship with the island sailor. Her pockmarked face, marking her as “unfit” and incapable of reproducing “rightly”, indicates Margaret’s dysgenic reproductive status, or a reproduction that results from the sexual partnering of the “unfit.” The novel expands this term to examine how disease itself could be seen as a sign of unfitness, how disease could manifest itself as *the* sign of both physiological and mental unfitness, an idea that would come to be expressed in the early twentieth century as “moral contagion.”³⁸

Blackwell, however, was personally conflicted when it came to issues of poverty and suffering, at least prior to the time that the novel was written. In the 1850’s, she spent some time chronicling her experiences visiting tenement districts and prisons crowded with Irish and German immigrants for the *New York Tribune*. Her experiences led her to write a series of articles entitled “Shadows of Our Social System,” in which she lamented the hopelessness and desperation of the women of these tenements, calling it a “black shadow” on our “polished, enlightened, civilized Christianized society” (Zink-

³⁷ See Dale Bauer’s essay “In the Blood: Sex, Sentiment, and the Ugly Girl,” *Differences* 11.3 (1999): 57-75 and Rosemarie Garland Thompson’s “Crippled Girls and Lame Old Women: Sentimental Spectacles of Sympathy in Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Writing,” *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Karen L. Kilcup, (Malden: Blackwell, 1998).

³⁸ Jacob Riis coined the term to describe the threat of the tenements, encapsulated in concerns over communicable disease, but as the term indicate, operating on the slippery slope between the physical reality of the “dangerous conditions of the spaces of urban poverty” and the perceived threat of the morally infectious behaviors of the tenements’ populations to society (Wald, *Contagious*, 115).

Sawyer 162). In a letter to Abby Hopper Gibbons, who accompanied her on her work in these districts, she wrote,

The work among the poor and degraded in New York was so pitiful that it was almost too much for healthy sympathy, at least to one whose life had hitherto been so sheltered as mine; and coming not long after the serious religious overturning of my mind at South Butler³⁹ and before the reconstruction of my positive beliefs, it made the whole world a place of shadows and sorrows. (qtd. in Cazden 188)

Blackwell, like other religious reformers, saw human misery and pain as distinctly the result of human activity and rejected the view that such pain came into the world as the result of the sin and death caused by the fall of Adam and Eve. Failing to see the institutional and social causes of poverty, Blackwell, faced with the overwhelming misery witnessed in the tenements and prisons of New York, needed to find another solution to the cause of poverty and suffering.

Blackwell found this solution in the emerging fields of hereditary science and the works of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer. In truth, Blackwell's background and knowledge in science was scanty, a result of the fact that like others who went to college before 1870, she studied "natural philosophy," rather than science, and her knowledge of scientific principles such as the empirical method was practically nonexistent.

Nevertheless, Blackwell read the works of prominent philosophers and scientists, taking years to read and digest the difficult concepts and eventually distilling them into her own scientific writings, beginning with *Studies in General Science*, published just before *The Island Neighbors*, in 1869. She was particularly interested in Darwin and Spencer's works and developed her own progressive view of human development as a result of

³⁹ Blackwell is alluding here to her experiences during her year as an ordained minister in a small, rural New England community, which caused her to have somewhat a crisis of faith because her perceived inability to adequately lead her flock and help them deal spiritually with loss and suffering. See Cazden, *ABB: A Biography*.

reading their works. Building on Darwin's theory of evolution, Spencer applied it to human beings, arguing in the absence of proof otherwise, that all the characteristics that an organism possessed, including moral, intellectual, and physical, would be passed on to its offspring. In addition, he saw the natural and human worlds as fundamentally connected and integrated in their parts, and naturally progressing forward.⁴⁰ Blackwell accepted Spencer's idea of a fundamentally integrated world and the natural progression of man, but rejected his fierce individualistic view of this process—Spencer thought that those unemployed and unable to support themselves should be allowed to starve to death—in favor of a view of society as socially integrated for the benefit of all: “The struggle for existence, then, regarded in its whole scope, is but a perfected system of cooperations in which all sentient and insentient forces mutually co-work in securing the highest ultimate good” (*Studies in General Science* 52). In other words, in her view of human evolution, society was progressing cooperatively towards the good of all. In fact, her faith in man's ability to rationally progress was manifest:

Man alone possesses discriminations broad enough to enable him to distinguish between the intrinsically right and wrong, the true and the false, the beautiful and the ugly; and his volitions and sensations are commensurate with his perceptions, he only can intelligently make his own and other lives more and more desirable, by a closer conformity with all established coordinations. He alone can enter upon a course of unlimited improvement—of unending progress. (*Studies in General Science* 231)

Blackwell, then, takes Spencer's belief in a fundamentally integrated world and remakes that belief into a metaphysical notion of man's “unending progress” away from the ugly and towards the beautiful. In eugenics terms, Blackwell saw the natural progression of man as moving away from the dysgenic and towards the eugenic. The ideal solution to the problem of dysgenic reproduction for Blackwell, then, is a sort of negative voluntary

reproduction, whereby the dysgenic recognize their inherent deficiencies and abstain from reproducing for the good of all.

Disease As the Dysgenic Signifier

As demonstrated in *The Island Neighbors*, for Blackwell, disease seems to function as *the* sign of dysgenic status. The novel is obsessed with disease and illness, and it is not surprising, given this obsession, that it seems to engage with the nineteenth century notion of the social body as akin to a biological organism, subject to the same threats of contamination and infection as the physical body. As John Chadwick, nineteenth century physician and positivist figure puts it, “The sickness of our times afflicts the social organism” (qtd. in Leach 21). This eugenic plot device of the self-imposed isolation of the dysgenic threat, which thereby prevents the threat of their reproduction from infecting the society, imagines solving the eugenic problem, not as the twentieth century did by institutionalizing eugenic policies and eradicating the reproductive potential of the unfit, but by working only to protect the social body from the negative affects of the dysgenic reproduction. Instead of hunting the unfit out and expelling the threat to society by preventing the possibility of their reproduction, in the novel the threat of the dysgenic is neutralized by isolating them on the island where they may reproduce but their dysgenic reproduction would not taint the overall society. It was a policy of isolating, not expunging, the dysgenic threat. The novel’s concern over the naturalizing of reproduction, the many references to the connection between familial lines, breeding, and the natural world, serve to strengthen the connection between Margaret’s unfit body and the probable outcome of her relationship. Their isolation on

the island at the end of the novel offers Blackwell's mythic societal solution to dysgenic reproduction—rather than focusing on preventing the dysgenic from reproducing, she seems to argue, society should try to isolate the reproductive consequences of such unions and prevent those undesirable outcomes from infecting the rest of the social body.

Even though the novel is obsessed with illness, the only character who actually suffers (or has suffered) from disease is Margaret. Margaret's body is, in fact, the only diseased body in the novel. Many of the characters are described as "infirm," but Blackwell creates a distinction between infirmity and disease that separates neurasthenia,⁴¹ the disorder of nervous exhaustion that predominantly affected the middle and upper classes, from the diseased bodies of the working class. From the beginning of the novel, Mr. Warner is described as having a neurasthenic-like ailment: "Mr. Warner was a man hardly past middle life; but years of suffering and infirmity, while they had left one sunny side to his character, had added a shady one—like an apple which has ripened unequally: smooth and delicious looking, from one point of view, but gnarled and a little worm-eaten, from the other" (11). This opening description of him sets up an important trope in the novel: the way that human physiology is linked to the natural

⁴¹ Neurologist George Beard coined the term "neurasthenia" in 1869, from *neuro* for nerve and *asthenia* for weakness. A sort of catchall term, the disorder applied to nervous "exhaustion," or any non-specific medial or emotional distress, from stress to mental neurosis, short of actual insanity or mental breakdown. The symptoms were generally vague: fatigue, headache, dyspepsia, and a general inability to keep up former activity levels. Distinct from hysteria, which was primarily attached to women and associated with physical symptoms such as loss of feeling, hypochondria, which concerned perceived imaginary symptoms and a desire to not improve, and melancholy, which indicated the presence of delusions, neurasthenia was viewed as a valid affliction. Beard, a follower of Darwin and Spencer, saw the disorder as an evolutionary result of modern life, related to urban living and the modern business world, which meant that the disorder was primarily diagnosed in middle and upper class men and sometimes upper class women because of their more "delicate" natures. Interestingly, Theodore Roosevelt suffered from the disorder in his youth. See F.G.'s Gosling's *Before Freud: Neurasthenia and the American Medical Community, 1870-1910* for a discussion of the history of neurasthenia in the American medical community; T. Jackson Lear's work *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* for a discussion of neurasthenia and the emergence of a therapeutic culture; and Angus McLaren's *Impotence: A Cultural History* for a discussion of neurasthenia and nineteenth century manhood.

world. In this description, his body, because of the infirmity, is likened to an apple, not quite rotten, but allowed by circumstances to become physically stunted, “gnarled”, a “little worm-eaten.” This analogy speaks volumes about his “infirmity,” which, as we find out in the novel, seems to be, in the classic symptoms of neurasthenia, the result of too much leisure and a weak temperament and not the result of physical “disease.”

Blackwell uses the character of Captain Giles, the sage old sea captain of the island who is in the “habit of curing people,” to comment on the nature of Mr. Warner’s ailment and to reveal the “falseness” of his health problems, more the result of his class than any physical deficiency. In fact, Captain Giles feels sure that he could “cure” Mr. Warner of his ailments if given the chance and that all Mr. Warner needs is some hearty sea air, good food, and good exercise, which also happened to be the classic nineteenth century cure for neurasthenia. As he points out, “that Mr. Warner, when he feels like it, is as merry as a sleigh-bell on smooth roads; but he sinks down all in a minute—like a baby that’s lost its mother, and nobody to comfort it” (17). His position is validated when, just after arriving on the island, Mr. Warner, who had been complaining of feeling poorly, is immediately restored: “Afterwards, when the storm waxed wilder, the invalid’s depressed spirits rose to a sudden exaltation. He forgot himself, and, standing erect, drinking in long breaths of the purified air, he seemed to have grown strong and healthful within five minutes. ‘This is really grand,’ he said, as the ocean and the thunder roared together. It was hard to keep him from stepping out into the tempest, in his enthusiasm” (14). While Mr. Warner represents the neurasthenic infirmity of the leisure class, Captain Giles’s ailments are the natural result that comes with age and a life of hard physical labor. His “back’s a little stiff”(15) and he’s described as “standing half erect, with one

hand pressed hard against his rheumatic back, and the other resting on his knee” (16).

His infirmary is no mystery, though. As Mrs. Giles puts it, “It ain’t every one that can be as much a man as ever at nearly eighty. [...] Twice a child, comes from sickness as well as age” (17).

Margaret’s disease, though, unlike Mr. Warner or Captain Giles, is not the result of the natural breakdown of the body over time or the excess of leisure and absence of physical activity. Mr. Warner and Captain Giles represent two forms of “ailments” but the key to understanding Blackwell’s fascination with disease is Margaret. Blackwell clearly wants to constantly remind the reader of Margaret’s diseased past, of her less than perfect physical health, and her dysgenic possibilities. Without fail, every time Margaret is described physically in the novel, the narrator references her pockmarked face.

Particularly, when Alfred Brand, the young sailor on the island and Margaret’s romantic interest, describes her, it is always in terms of her physical scars. In their first meeting, he notices her “smiling face, only a little pockmarked, with clear, shining eyes”(15). The reference to her smiling, pretty face is always accompanied by the phrase, “only a little pock-marked.” Other times she is described as having “clear, frank eyes” but also “ugly pock-marks” (32). In an even more telling moment, Alfred muses on her physical appearance: “She had a pleasant, honest face, which almost any one would have called rather pretty, if the envious small-pox had not sot its signet there; but as Alfred’s thoughts rested on this defect, he felt that he could love her all the better for it” (38). Small pox’s “signet” has been left on her face, the mark of the disease from which she cannot hide or escape. The “signet” of the disease marks her as dysgenic, as physically imperfect, incapable of the sort of ideal reproduction advocated by the eugenic proponents and

Blackwell herself. And because physiological fitness was so closely related to moral fitness, her physical defect cast doubt on her moral state. ‘Sickness is a crime,’ observed Elizabeth Cady Stanton, ‘since it is an evidence of a violation of some physical law’ (qtd. in Leach 20). Sickness itself was seen as a sign of moral failing.

The nineteenth century perception of the connection between moral and physical fitness, which I argue is foundational for the eugenic movement, is made explicit in the novel as well. In order to reinforce the reproductive threat of the couple, Blackwell imagines the disease as affecting Margaret both physically and emotionally. Blackwell, in fact, claimed, “The solution to the problem of women’s sphere must be obtained in physiology” (qtd. in Leach 19). In establishing this link between the body and mind, Blackwell plays into nineteenth century fears about “unfitness,” casting her maid heroine as sexually, reproductively, and eugenically unfit. Even further, Alfred muses on “the suffering which doubtless accompanied the repulsive disease, and his heart softened with a manly wish to add joy and love as an offset, not only to the pain of body, but also to the necessary mental distress, which perhaps she sometimes felt keenly even now” (38). Alfred imagines the pockmarks as a sign of her past physical distress and ongoing mental pain, as well as evidence of her femininity. Alfred’s willingness to look past the sign of her disease seems to result from his natural “sympathies” to her plight, an indication that their romantic and sexual attraction is class-based. In other words, the threat of the dysgenic does not seem to be that Margaret will infect the upper class. In the logic of the text, her dysgenic “sign” draws those appropriate her for and repels those more eugenically desirable potential mates, such as the Warner’s son. The contagion threat is not from the sexual contamination of the upper class by the dysgenic—it’s the threat of

reproductive contagion resulting from the sexual unions of the reproductively undesirables.

Despite the fact that her physical body is marked by disease, several characters remark on the fact that Margaret is “never sick.” The apparent contradiction of her being marked by disease and yet physically healthy can be reconciled, though, by understanding that the mark of disease for her functions not as an actual indicator of her physical health but as a disqualifying marker of her reproductive status. In other words, being healthy does not help her case—her dysgenic status is part of her being, not something that can be escaped from or that she can remedy. She is fundamentally and manifestly unfit for reproduction.

In a perhaps even more damning narrative trope, the novel makes several connections between human physiology and the natural world of the island that ultimately serve to strengthen even more the eugenic argument of the novel. Even further, Blackwell’s use of “natural” analogies in describing the genealogy of the islanders serves to naturalize the pro-eugenic thread in the narrative. In one of several direct references to the inbreeding of the island families, Captain Giles asserts, “The whole stock of the island—this end of it especially—is linked in and out like one of those brain-corals” (27). This reference to the isolation of the genetic pool of the island imagines a sort of voluntary and “natural” genetic containment of the islanders that serves as Blackwell’s ideal solution to the problem of dysgenic reproduction. Of course, in the novel, the result of the genetic isolation for the islanders is degenerative. As Captain Giles explains, “One family’s deaf and dumb, except for one child: That is a rather common infirmity in our neighborhood—at least it crops out in a dozen families or

so; but all springing from the same root. Even potatoes won't grow forever in the one soil" (29). That "potatoes won't grow forever in the one soil" indicates that the genealogy of the families on the island is like a pasture that has been allowed to stagnate—in other words, the geographic isolation of the islanders has led to a lack of new "blood" being brought into their genetic pool, resulting in a stagnation of their lines not unlike the sort of stagnation that occurs when a farmer fails to rotate the crops grown in a particular field. The "natural" result is the potatoes eventually fail to thrive, just as these island families eventually fail to thrive genetically, causing the "infirmity" of the neighbors on the island.

This connection advocates a sort of natural selection view of human reproduction that exposes essentialist, xenophobic undertones of the novel, as evidenced by a conversation between Frank, the wealthy son of the Warners, and Mr. Dennis, another island local who, like Captain Giles, offers sage advice and local color for the tourists. When Frank asks Mr. Dennis if he is familiar with the theories of Darwin, Mr. Dennis replies, "I *have* heard of that scheme for manufacturing man, and elephants, and rattlesnakes all out of fishes—going off on different tacks to do it—the spokes growing out of the same hub at the center, and other spokes running all round" (123). However, he doesn't believe in the theory: "I don't think much of that scheme—not for any thing that can be handed down intellectually" (123). While this may seem like a case of provincialism versus intellectualism, he goes on to claim, "If life is any thing worth having, I guess Providence mebbe took as much pains to make a musquito a musquito, and an elephant an elephant—to say nothing of making a man a man—once for all—as he did to make a chunk of gold, gold [...] It appears to me that a fish is a fish—himself,

and nobody else—and will stay so, likely, now and forever” (124). This take on Darwin’s theory and the idea of natural selection dismisses it in favor of religious essentialism, which in some ways runs counter to what Blackwell wrote in her scientific writings. In the context of the novel, this speech serves to show that the islander’s genetic deficiencies are part of their essence, divinely given, adding a religious bent to eugenic thought that allows Blackwell to merge her eugenically-motivated views of human society with a religious belief in divine province. The novel, then, seems to see no remedy for their situation beyond a continuing of the current track—let the degenerates degenerate. As the sage Mr. Dennis claims, it is “better not marry at all than mated criss-cross” (128). In other words, there is no other solution to the problem of the genealogy and reproduction on the island than to keep to your own kind. In this way, the novel seems to be an early forerunner of naturalism, with the plot of decline applying to the entire island. The island shares with Margaret the problem of their inherent deficiencies, and so it is fitting that the problem of her dysgenic reproduction should be reconciled by her remaining on the island. The island and Margaret share the same dysgenic fate.

“Contagious” Sexuality

Part of what makes Margaret and Alfred’s relationship so connected to issues of reproduction, and eugenics, is its highly sexualized nature. From their first meeting, when they “shook hands at parting,” the “operation” “left a new tingle in the young sailor’s finger” (14). Clearly, the “new tingle” in his fingers left by their first touch indicates their sexual chemistry, as well as the “contagious” nature of her sexuality. This is furthered by the common romantic trope of the sensible, young man who is so

overtaken, one could say “infected,” by his passion for a young lady, usually one he has just met, that he begins to act differently, impetuously. Alfred, although described as a “steady boy” (28), impulsively tells Margaret that he will propose marriage to her at their second meeting. Even more, the novel makes clear that this is Margaret’s particular affect, not a result of a generally romantic nature on Alfred’s part. Although he’s “quick to feel,” he is described as not having had romantic feelings in the past: “It was strange that he was so perversely cold-hearted. He reproached himself for it bitterly; but taking himself to task didn’t in the least mend the matter. Finally, he gave up the idea of ever getting into that state of very fervid fascination to which all his young friends were so prone” (31). In fact, he had decided to first choose a wife and then “compel himself to love her” (31). He evokes a rational view of marriage and love, not unlike that of free love and rational marriage proponent John Noyes, a view that Blackwell herself seemed to somewhat share.⁴² The heated debates within the women’s rights movement over marriage affected Blackwell’s view of the institution and for a long time it seemed that she would not marry at all. Yet she did eventually marry Sam Blackwell, a member of the famous reformer Blackwell family. In choosing to marry, Blackwell herself took a rationalist approach. As her biographer Elizabeth Cazden asserts, “Antoinette was convinced that most, if not all, of the inequities of marriage as an institution could be eliminated by careful planning” (107). In writing about her impending marriage, she dealt strictly with the logistical concerns of integrating her work with her new status as wife and wrote of their future,

⁴² See Walters’ *American Reformers*, (New York: Hill & Fang, 1978) for a discussion John Noyes’ views on free love, rational marriage, and sexual reform.

Of course we won't mark out the future too rigidly, or take any strict *vows* on the subject or make plans which *must* continue for two or five years. We will be governed very much by circumstances and what seems best as the years go by, but I think, Sam, we can be self sovereigns, we can bend everything within and without to our wills, and our wills to our intellects. (qtd. in Cazden)

Her faith in the idea of “self sovereignty” to cure the ills of marriage exposes her rationalist view of the institution and her belief in self-control as the means of affecting social change.

Alfred's rationalist view of marriage changes, however, when he meets Margaret, and “all the ice of his nature melted with a fervent heat” (32). In fact, as the novel goes on, Alfred's physical appearance comes to be described in terms of passion and sexual desire: his “eyes were flashing now with fire and energy enough to hide the deformities of red hair, freckled skin, and brusque manner” (117). Margaret's social isolation ironically leads her to be even more susceptible to their sexual chemistry, as “very naturally, Margaret, from her isolation and her real warmth of nature, responded almost unconsciously to the always respectful, earnest tenderness and good-will which expressed itself in every look and gesture” (32). And indeed, Margaret is described as having “a developed womanly nature—f forbearing, sympathetic, and fertile in resources” (23), the references to her “womanly nature” and her “fertile” resources, of course, connoting sexuality and reproductive fecundity. The infectious effect of her body is something, however, that her mind, well-trained to be respectable and feminine, is incapable of containing. As a result, even as she is infecting him with her sexuality, she remains appropriately passive and feminine.

Margaret, too, is affected by the sexual nature of their relationship. The sight of his ship results in her “color” “coming and going in a fever of excitement” (89), the

language here a not-so-thinly veiled reference to sexual acts. The affect of their sexual passion, however, indicates her appropriately chaste response, which interestingly reveals that even being a modest, respectable young girl does not negate her dysgenic status. In other words, the “fever” of their passion indicts her whether or not she acts on it. It has, in effect, already spread and contaminated Alfred, exposing the dangerous and contagious nature of her dysgenic status. The “fever” between them, then, continues to spread, even as they both at times try to resist it. Alfred feels a “fever of hope, self-reproach, and a terrible fear” at the thought of a reconciliation with her, and when he found himself “upon the deck of little vessel” “every thing around him quickened memory, raising with him a new fever of hope and unrest which kept heart and brain both throbbing long after he lay wrapped up in his blanket” (91). One can only wonder what else was “throbbing.” In fact, their relationship often seems consumed with flame: “Alfred was perhaps a little conspicuous, from his unusually flaming red shirt; but if he had been clad in a suit of literal flames, he could hardly have filled Margaret’s eye with more glare and warmth than he now did. She absorbed so much of the influence that it seemed to be burning into her very soul, and yet she could not turn away” (121). The sexual nature of their relationship is quite evident; the expression “hot and heavy” seems particularly apt here.

The highly sexualized nature of their relationship serves to reinforce the dysgenic threat their reproduction poses. Free love thinkers and social purists believed that excess sexual drive was a form of societal disease: “The Satyr (male or female) who cannot see one of the opposite sex without the production of physical excitement,” Linda Gordon explains, “is not strong, but irritable; the nature is diseased” (qtd. in Gordon 79). This

understanding of excessive sexual excitement as a form of a diseased nature doubly indicts both Alfred and Margaret. Margaret, already marked once with physical disease, reinforces her dysgenic status with her sexualized nature. At the same time, Alfred's choice of an obviously dysgenic partner makes their sexual relationship symptomatic of their diseased relationship, rather than an indicator of it, and further indicates how their dysgenic attraction is a sign of their class status. Because social purist doctrine held that sexual immorality was just as damaging within a marriage as it was outside of it, marriage and the legitimizing of their sexual passion would do nothing to alleviate the dysgenic threat. Any offspring their union might yield would be unavoidably and irrefutably "unfit." The eventual outcome of Margaret and Alfred's relationship is reflected in a letter published in 1902 by eugenics advocate Dr. Joseph Greer. Allegedly sent to him by a patient, the letter reveals the "natural" result of one dysgenic couple's diseased relationship:

I was married when only sixteen...He was twenty-two; strong, healthy, and with large sexual demands...I thought him exacting and selfish, and he thought me unaccommodating and capricious...If I refused, his great, strong fingers would sink into my flesh and force would compel submission...As a result I would be bruised and beaten, and perhaps made sick and have a doctor before I got over it. Two little babies were literally killed before they were born, and the one that did live I have seen often in convulsions from 'sexual vice,' either a transmitted tendency or a birthmark due to the infernal nastiness I was forced to witness during pregnancy. When at last I watched his little life go out, I knew that he was spared a life of imbecility or idiocy, and I could not mourn."⁴³

While neither the relationship in the novel nor all dysgenic relationships in general were imagined as physically violent, as this one clearly was, the letter illustrates the connection

⁴³ Gordon contextualizes this case in terms of its implication for feminist sexual reformers, but its implications for the developing eugenics narratives also seem clear. Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 79.

that social purists and eugenic thinkers of the time made between excessive sexual passion and diseased, dysgenic reproduction.

Alfred's movement from a rational, free love thinker to a romantic, sexualized hero further exposes the dysgenic and class-based nature of their potential union. Rather than treating love, sex, and reproduction rationally – as demonstrated by marrying someone fit, physiologically and morally, for reproduction – Alfred instead irrationally follows his heart and marries someone marked as dysgenically unfit. Here, Blackwell uses Alfred to make a feminist critique of the dysgenic dangers of romantic love. William Leach asserts,

Feminists turned away from romantic love as blind, passionate, seductive. In an unequal society, romantic love threatened the interests of women. So did sentimental love that portrayed women as idealized objects and the passive recipients of masculine affections. In their place, feminist put a rational, symmetrical, and egalitarian love based on a knowledge that made no room for ideality, passion, or fantasy. (99-100)

Given these views, it is not surprising, then, that Blackwell would allow her characters to engage in romantic love and simultaneously “punish” them for doing so. Furthermore, Margaret's choice of an “unworthy lover” and capitulation to feelings of passion and love over “duty” indicate that not only is she dysgenically unfit for reproduction, but that she also chooses to procreate unfitly anyway.

Blackwell imagines an idealized solution to the problem of Margaret and Alfred's dysgenic reproduction by ending the novel with an overt societal embrace of their marriage and potential offspring (the Warners relent in their feelings toward Alfred and go to the wedding). Yet, the novel concludes with the couple isolated on the island, along with all of the local degenerates, so that their dysgenic reproduction will not be able to

contaminate the greater society.⁴⁴ The novel ends, then, with their return to the island, newly wed: “Margaret had come back to the island that evening a bride. She and Alfred Brand were to keep house together in the furnished cottage where she had spent the summer, while their own home was building higher up on the hills” (138). Alfred “drew Margaret to his heart with all the manly gratitude of a strong soul, satisfied with the fullest fruition” (138).⁴⁵ The word “fruition” here evokes the “fruition” of their union, their future offspring. Their idyllic ending on the island masks the larger social commentary of the novel. In the end, the novel seems to be suggesting that if you can’t reproduce rightly and rationally and you insist on reproducing anyway, at least keep it to yourself.

Dysgenic “Carriers,” Tainted Blood, and The New Demographic War

Elizabeth Yukins argues about eugenic policies and rhetoric in the twentieth century that it increasingly focused on the “insidious threat of moral pathology and biological degeneration” that went beyond visual appearance and racial categorization (164). This “insidious threat” could be localized to the site of reproduction and the women’s bodies that underwent the reproductive process. As a result, Yukins argues that at the turn of the century “reproduction was a crucial site for gender, class, and race

⁴⁴ William Leach casts this ending as a conflict between passion and the rational world: “Both the servant and the passion, two important sources for social conflict, remain on the island, separated from the life of industrial society. In this sense, rationalistic, industrialist society cannot tolerate romantic passion. It must abolish it in order to exist; passion represents a threat to survival” (111). However, in his analysis, it is not entirely clear just what this threat to survival is. Analyzing the novel within the context of the growing culture of eugenic thought in the nineteenth century provides an answer to this question. The threat is, of course, the threat of dysgenic reproduction.

⁴⁵ The use of the term “manly” here is interesting in that Alfred can be read as being feminized by his movement from “masculine” self-control and rationality to “feminine” emotional and irrational behavior. Blackwell uses this term several times in connection with Alfred and seems to be motivated by a desire to call these categorizations into question.

regulations, and national well-being depended upon careful genealogical surveillance” (164). This new emphasis on genealogical surveillance, and the eugenics advocates increasing willingness to turn to state intervention and regulation in the fight against the “unfit,” shows how the turn of the century eugenicists ultimately rejected Blackwell’s notion of voluntary self-containment as a model for dealing with the dysgenic threat.

Turn-of-the-century novelist and activist Mary Austin writes in her autobiography of her daughter’s disability, which today might be termed autism: “Brought up as I was, in possession of what passed for eugenic knowledge, it had never occurred to me that the man I had married would be less frank about his own inheritance than I had been about mine...I who had entered motherhood with the highest hopes and intentions had to learn too late that I had borne a child with tainted blood” (qtd. in Richards 150). The “tainted blood” rhetoric she uses could, in another context, refer to the “taint” of miscegenation, but here it helps blur the boundary between eugenic rhetoric of “genealogical surveillance” and the desire to imbue whiteness with a privileged reproductive status that protects whiteness as category from eugenically motivated policies. This taint, this “bad blood,” according to eugenic advocates such as Goddard, results from “the defective mentality and bad blood having been brought into the normal family of good blood, first from the nameless feeble-minded girl and later by additional contaminations from other sources” (qtd. in Yukins 178-179). Hence, unlike the “bad blood” that emerges from the threat of racial contamination, this contamination occurs when “bad blood” is brought into the family of “good” (read: white) blood. As Yukins explains,

In specifically demonizing ‘feeble-minded’ women and labeling them as sexual contaminants, eugenicists thus developed a powerful and effective means to identify an alien source of ‘bad blood’ and to reconstitute the dominant inside/outside boundary. By displacing blame for sexual and

social transgression onto the reproductive bodies of impoverished women, eugenicists sought to reify dominant class and race hierarchies, yet their diagnostic agenda reveals the selectivity of scientific claims of white racial superiority. While eugenicists strove to warn the American public against undetected threats to white racial progress, the popularity of their theories also made visible the ways in which white racialism can fracture at the point of class integration. (181)

While it is clear that eugenicists threatened to fracture the very white racialism that they sought to create in their demonizing of feeble-minded women, the notion of an “alien source of ‘bad blood’” allowed them to wield eugenic policy as a class-based weapon while simultaneously reifying whiteness as a privileged biological marker that operated outside of the threat of eugenic policies.

What changed, then, as the eugenic movement moved into the twentieth century? How did eugenics become about not just the reproduction of the fit, but about the reproduction of the whites? Partly, it seems a response to the failed attempts to stem the tide of undesirable demographic trends of the nineteenth century. But even more importantly, as fears of race suicide gained traction, race more than class or status became the preeminent sign of “fitness.” It was no longer enough that the better classes of whites were exhorted to reproduce—it was essential that all whites reproduce in order to combat the perceived threat to white cultural supremacy of the New Negro, the Japanese and the Chinese, the Cuban, and the Latin American. According to race suicide proponents, white cultural supremacy in America was being attacked from all sides—from within by the New Negro, from the west by the Japanese and the Chinese, from the south by the Latin Americans, and from the east by southern and eastern Europeans, Russians, and Jews. Reproduction became a weapon of this new “warfare of the

cradle”—and white women of all classes were the foot soldiers, enlisted regardless of class.

It is not surprising, then, that given this war over population statistics and census data, the eugenics movement infiltrated the courts and social systems. Oliver Wendell Holmes, in his 1927 Supreme Court decision on the legality of forced sterilization for “imbeciles,” argues, “It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate off-spring for crimes, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who was manifestly unfit from continuing their kind.” In the minds of twentieth century eugenicists, the nineteenth century solution of the self-imposed isolation of dysgenic reproduction and relying on positivist notions of the individual as working voluntarily for the good of all failed to deal adequately with problem of race suicide and dysgenic reproduction. Twentieth century society took the drastically more controlling step of eradicating the problem by eradicating the threat of dysgenic reproduction altogether. Amos Bulter, Secretary to the Board of State Charities in Indiana, gave an address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1901, the very same organization to which Blackwell belonged, that sums up the change in mood from Blackwell’s imagined solution of social integration tempered with isolationism when necessary to the Supreme Court’s decision in favor of eradication:

Comparatively few persons yet realize the suffering, the moral degradation [sic], and not least, the increasing expense entailed upon the public by the progeny, often illegitimate, of feeble-minded women. Could our citizens know the truth, the enormous expense, and the depth of degradation caused by this group of degenerates, they would be amazed. Could they look into the future and see what would be the accumulated cost piled up before them in money, in immortality, in succeeding generations of defectives, they would not rest until they had sought means to prevent all this.” (Yukins 164)

This “scientific” claim was met on the part of twentieth century eugenicists with the determination to “prevent all this,” a determination that the earlier nineteenth century eugenicists such as Blackwell had not yet reached.

Chapter 4: The Birth of the Modern Abortion Debate: “Choice,” Shame, and the Prospect of Reproductive Freedom in the Progressive Era

By the late nineteenth century, emerging biomedical knowledge of the female reproductive system and advances in the technology of birth control offered women the prospect of ensuring their desired reproductive outcomes through knowledgeable consumer choices. As I lay out in chapter 2, however, these advances in reproductive control, and the declining of the reproduction of white, middle class women, were viewed as a significant threat to the overall health and well being of the country. A eugenics movement formed to combat these demographic trends by encouraging the “better class” of women, both through cultural narratives and institutional and government practices, to embrace their reproductive duty and reproduce for the good of the nation. The emerging eugenic ideology failed, however, to stem the tide of falling reproductive rates and increasing insistence on women’s access to birth control and sexual agency.⁴⁶ The birth rate continued to drop—from 3.56 in 1900 to 2.77 in 1920—and one study estimated that 83% of women were using birth control.⁴⁷

Even worse, despite the successful efforts to legalize abortion in the 1860s and 1870s, by all accounts women were still exerting pressure on family doctors to perform them, often through the legal loophole of “therapeutic abortions,” or abortion deemed medically necessary. Because there was no set legal definition of what constituted “medically necessary,” however, doctors had broad discretion in determining whether an abortion was indeed “therapeutic.” While the inherent difficulty in determining reliable statistics on illegal medical procedures is apparent, some doctors in the late nineteenth-

⁴⁶ See Ch. 2 for a discussion of eugenics ideology in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

⁴⁷ Dorothy Schneider and Carl Schneider, *American Women in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920* (New York: Facts on File Publisher, 1993). Mosher’s study cited in Schneider and Schneider.

century estimated that two million abortions were performed annually.⁴⁸ More important than the actual number of abortions performed, though, was the perception of their prevalence. A 1911 comment from a physician that “those who apply for abortions are from every walk of life, from the factory girl to the millionaire’s daughter; from the laborer’s wife to that of the banker, no class, no sect seems to be above...the destruction of the fetus” indicates the problem that abortion posed for eugenicists (Reagan 23). The fear that “the millionaire’s daughter” and the “banker’s wife” were not above terminating their pregnancies, when their pregnancies were seen as so essential to the future of the country, indicated that calls for these women to reproduce out of a sense of duty to their country were falling on deaf ears.

If America was indeed engaged in a demographic war, it was one that the eugenic proponents and supporters of the sexual status quo were losing. Clearly, rallying for middle-and upper-class white women to reproduce in greater numbers was not turning the reproductive tide—the country needed to reconstruct the terms of the ideological narrative, to modernize anti-birth control rhetoric, if it wanted to have any hope of reversing these demographic trends. In other words, simply chastising women for failing to procreate was not going to win the ideological war for them. Putting the emphasis on women’s “duty” to reproduce was clearly not increasing reproduction rates.

Part of the failure of this notion of reproductive duty was that it was at odds with the emerging sense of reproductive freedom offered by nineteenth century advances in reproductive control and turn-of-the-century changes in courtship rituals and sexual

48 See Leslie Reagan’s *When Abortion Was a Crime* for a discussion of both the practice and prevalence of therapeutic abortions and information on the prevalence of illegal abortions.

practices.⁴⁹ If the rise of modern birth control and changes in sexual practices promised greater sexual freedom as a result, the rhetoric of duty focused on limiting or negating this perceived new freedom, an ultimately ineffective strategy. This prospect of sexual freedom could be maintained, however, by focusing on the idea of “choice” rather than duty. As a result, early twentieth century eugenicist and anti-birth control advocates moved away from the narrative of “duty” to the narrative of “choice.” If women were given the choice to make reproductive decisions, then their burgeoning sexual freedom would remain intact. By recasting reproduction as a “choice” rather than a “duty,” proponents could allow women to feel that they retained their ability to manage their reproductive choices freely. In other words, sexually active women, whether they were married or single, could choose to prevent pregnancy altogether through the preventative use of birth control or they could choose to either continue or terminate an existing pregnancy.

Of course, because this reframing as choice rather than duty emerged from within already established cultural narratives—namely, narratives of class, race, sexuality, and gender—the actual ability to freely make reproductive choices is a construction that is every bit as subject to prescription as the earlier narrative about duty was. The rhetoric of choice functioned as an ideological weapon in the Progressive Era. As two early cultural texts that explicitly depict abortion as a matter of choice reveal, this new rhetoric offered

⁴⁹ The changing sexual practices and mores of the Progressive Era, and the contemporary perceptions of them, has been the subject of immense critical study. The overall historical narrative of this criticism sees the early twentieth century as a time of loosening of sexual mores and increasing personal and sexual freedom for young women especially, although these changes, like all perceived upheavals of established social order, were not without their concomitant social anxiety. The range of work on this subject is vast, but John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman’s *Intimate Matters*, Sharon Ullman’s *Sex Seen: The Emergence of Modern Sexuality in America*, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s *Disorderly Conduct*, and Kathy Peiss’s *Cheap Amusements* offer a few compelling discussions of the emergence of modern American sexuality and sexual norms.

the illusion of freedom and personal agency while at the same time, by encoding those reproductive choices with gendered, racialized, class-based tropes, the narratives circumscribe the heroines' "choices." Choice, then, becomes a successful way for eugenic advocates to press their reproductive agendas while maintaining the illusion of reproductive freedom. Reproductive "choice" in abortion then came to be cast in what modern readers will recognize as familiar, gendered tropes—that of the choice to be a "selfish" or a "good" girl.

An analysis of the 1916 anti-abortion film *Where Are My Children?*, written and directed by the successful Hollywood producer and eugenics proponent Lois Weber, and Edith Wharton's 1917 novel *Summer* reveal the birth of this modern abortion narrative. Wharton, too, has ties to the eugenics movement, although her exact views on the issue are the source of continued critical debate.⁵⁰ I argue in this chapter that these narratives taken together provide early examples of the depiction of abortion as "choice" and help us to understand the birth of the modern abortion debate in terms of the emerging sexual freedoms of the Progressive Era and their implications for reproductive choices. These texts not only directly dramatize the choice to continue or terminate a pregnancy, but also place the two central female characters and their respective reproductive decisions in the now familiar abortion-debate terms of "selfish" choices versus "good" girls. Weber's film is straightforward in its assessment of this: only selfish women have abortions. Wharton's novel, on the other hand, more clearly dramatizes the way that these choices were circumscribed by gendered, racialized and class-based tropes and shows how these

⁵⁰ A discussion of the eugenics theme in the novel will occur later in the chapter. Wharton's stance on eugenics has been the subject of great critical attention. See Dale Bauer's *Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics* and Jennie Kassonoff's *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race* for a couple of representative arguments.

reproductive choices were filtered through the narrative lens of shame. In doing so, she exposes the complexity with which this new narrative functioned in the Progressive Era by depicting the lack of real choices for the novel's protagonist, Charity. Driven by the shame of her dysgenic origins, Charity ultimately chooses to be a good girl, if an unhappy one.

Reproduction as "Choice"

The modern abortion debate revolves around the familiar term "choice." From the abortion rights supporters self-labeled "pro-choice" claim to the anti-abortion proponents slogan, "It's not a choice, it's a child," contemporary discourse over abortion imagines first and foremost that reproduction is a decision, an action with possible, and competing, options and outcomes. This contemporary view of reproduction emerged from the previous historical view of it as a singularly determined biological event, one that did not involve choices. For women of the past, pregnancy happened to women and women were left to face the consequences.

As Linda Gordon argues, after Roe v. Wade, the dominant abortion rights activists, using the legacy of the legal assertion of the right to privacy, focused on "choice" as its rallying cry, as "this language evoked the emotional and political power of the idea of freedom—as in freedom of choice—in American political discourse."⁵¹

Gordon argues that the reproductive rights' movement of the sixties and seventies was

⁵¹ See Linda Gordon's *The Moral Property of Women* for a discussion of the movements within America's history of birth control and abortion, and see Leslie Reagan's *When Abortion Was a Crime* for a detailed account of the legal movement and arguments that resulted in the decriminalization of abortion in the 1970s.

marked by a “reliance on a right to privacy and ‘choice’ and by the slogan for ‘abortion on demand.’” And while she rightly points out that the activists in the decades after this era, in response to conservative attacks and the weakening of the feminist movement, moved away from this rhetoric of privacy and choice to argue for abortion rights as a “*social* good, part of a larger group of reproductive rights that helped to create equality for women and social responsibility for children,” this legacy of putting abortion in terms of reproductive “choice” remains (297).

Gordon presents this shift as a choice on the part of the abortion rights proponents based on the emerging legal decisions regarding abortion. No doubt it was. It is certainly true that it has only been in the past couple of generations that women who supported abortion rights have identified themselves as “pro-choice,” rather than as supporters of birth control or “humane abortion.”⁵² It is also true that, as Gordon points out, this shift moves the debate away from a focus on abortion, and its contentious politics, and onto the rights of women, an important one in this current political climate of the thriving right-to-life movement.⁵³ The question this chapter addresses, though, is where we can locate the origin of this shift. It is my argument that, contrary to the general critical assumption that this change occurred only in the post-Roe v. Wade era and only as a result of the legal legacy of that decision, this conception of reproduction as a matter of “choice” emerged in the Progressive Era as a response to the promise of reproductive freedoms offered by the rise of modern birth control in the nineteenth century. This new

⁵² Many women in the decades prior to Roe v. Wade supported abortion as part of a larger concern for reproductive and social rights for women, including access to birth control. The organizations formed in the 1950s and 1960s tended to focus directly on the issue of abortion; one such organization was The Society for Humane Abortion in California. See Reagan’s *When Abortion Was a Crime*.

⁵³ Kristen Luker discusses the right-to-life campaign in her work *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*. In it, she argues that there have actually been several right-to-life campaigns motivated by different groups that have impacted women’s reproductive rights and abilities to make decisions about their own body and health in various ways.

narrative of choice, however, masked the eugenically-driven, socially conservative rhetoric of duty in a seemingly more progressive, more freeing language of “choice.”

The emergence of this view of reproduction as involving “choices” plays a key role in Progressive Era reproductive politics. Margaret Sanger, perhaps the most well known advocate in the history of the birth control movement, did not, like many of her contemporaries, support abortion.⁵⁴ Sanger, who coined the term “birth control” in 1915, in fact did not see abortion as part of the forms of reproductive control that she imagined birth control covered. In a 1923 pamphlet, she writes, “there is no commoner misapprehension concerning Birth Control than that which identifies it with abortion.” She asserts in the pamphlet that women are “practically forced into abortion” because of their lack of access to birth control: “Can it be imagined that any woman would resort to these painful and dangerous means of checking the increase of her family if she had access to scientific medical information that would enable her, without the slightest danger to herself, to prevent conception?” What is interesting about this pamphlet is the language of choice that Sanger uses. She argues, “without Birth Control the mother is given the *choice* of two crimes—to injure herself and to destroy her unborn child by abortion, or to bring into the world children for whom she cannot care, and who are doomed from birth to misery, ill health, deficiency or physical defect” (emphasis added) (qtd. in Tone 157). This is a markedly different argument about the nature of reproduction. In Sanger’s articulation, birth control offers a third option for women, who, without it, are faced with the choice of either having an abortion or continuing an

⁵⁴ There is some debate about whether Sanger’s official stance on abortion is a reflection of her personal beliefs or an effort to make her call for birth control less radical. See Angela Franks’ recent work *Margaret Sanger’s Eugenic Legacy* for a discussion of both Sanger’s position on abortion and her advocacy for eugenics.

unwanted pregnancy. The fact that she articulates reproduction, not as a singularly determined biological event, but as involving competing options, indicates the significant change to the way reproduction was imagined in the Progressive Era. Societal issues of birth control and abortion were not, as they had been previously, seen as purely medical issues best left to physicians or as demographic issues that politicians and ideologues need address. Sanger places women, and their choices, at the center of the reproductive rights debate. This is not a call to abstain from sexual activity to avoid reproduction, no real choice at all and one that negates the value of women's sexual lives, or a call to use reproduction as a tool for the social good, one that places societal good at the center of women's reproductive lives. This is a direct articulation of reproduction as a personal choice that women face, a choice that comes with options, however limited or flawed. This is a radical moment in the history of women's reproductive rights.

In fact, the term "reproductive rights" has very little meaning without choice. For the feminist of the nineteenth century, the term "reproductive rights" meant "voluntary motherhood," the idea that women's sexual and reproductive rights were limited to the right of married women to decline sex with their husbands in order to avoid pregnancy.⁵⁵ Women simply were not imagined as having "choices" when it came to reproduction. This is not to say that all pregnancies were carried to term or that women did not use birth control methods, including abortions. Women certainly did have various reproductive

⁵⁵ See Linda Gordon's *The Moral Property of Women* and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's *Disorderly Conduct* for a discussion of voluntary motherhood in the nineteenth century.

options, as the precipitous drop in birth rates shows, and they did have abortions, both self-induced and those performed by doctors.⁵⁶

What it does mean is that women were not *imagined* as having reproductive choices. The nineteenth century viewed abortion largely in medical, rather than moral, terms. As Chapter 1 shows, this view largely grew out of the nineteenth-century medical knowledge of pregnancy and the female body. Because doctors could not determine pregnancy through examination until later in the pregnancy, they relied on women's physiological experience of "quickening," the moment when the fetus can first be felt by the pregnant woman, as the determining factor for pregnancy. Quickening, though, does not occur until the fourth or fifth month, which meant during that time period, as I argue in Chapter 1, a lack of menstruation could result from a harmful obstruction of the female reproductive system or from pregnancy. The successful effort to legalize abortion in the nineteenth century resulted largely from arguments that abortion should be an entirely medical matter and that the only legal abortion should be the "therapeutic" ones performed by licensed and qualified doctors.⁵⁷

As Leslie Reagan points out, despite campaigns to educate women about the emerging reproductive sciences and discourage this quickening-based view of pregnancy, women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century continued to view pregnancy and abortion in much the same terms that generations of women before them had. In

⁵⁶ Leslie Reagan and James Mohr give in depth discussions of the historical and legal trends that led up to the legalization of abortion in the nineteenth century, as well as information on the prevalence of abortion in the nineteenth century. Although it is difficult to calculate given that there was not a clear distinction between treatment for "blocked menses" or a harmful obstruction of the female reproductive system and an abortion, historical evidence indicates that abortion was a quite common practice, both in the physician and midwives' offices and through homeopathic remedies in the home.

⁵⁷ See James Mohr's *Abortion in America*, Leslie Reagan's *When Abortion Was a Crime*, and Kristen Luker's *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* for discussions of the medical community's role and motives in the campaign to legalize abortion.

recounting the vernacular women used to describe their illegal abortions in the period between 1880 and 1930, women consistently used language such as “bring my courses on,” “fixed up,” and “to be put straight,” all of which follow the nineteenth century rhetorical model of viewing abortions as medical procedures intended to remedy physical ailments of the reproductive system (qtd. in Reagan 24). This is not a rhetorical argument based on the idea of choice. In their self-depictions, these women have no choice. What they have is a medical condition that needs medical attention.

As we can see from Sanger’s pamphlet and the now ubiquitous notions of women as having reproductive choices, at some point a paradigm shift occurred that moved women away from thinking of reproduction in purely medical terms to thinking of it in terms of choice and agency. The complexities of this shift are too vast for a complete discussion of them in this chapter; tied up in changing notions of selfhood, women’s relationship’s to sexuality and their body, and their places in the home and society, this shift is part of a larger historical narrative about the women’s rights movement and changing gender dynamics in the twentieth century. What this chapter will discuss is the way that fictive depictions of reproduction and pregnancy as involving conscious and deliberate choices in the Progressive Era reveal the socially-conservative purpose this new rhetoric of choice was put to and the way that already existing gendered, racialized, and class-based tropes of sexual norms and expectations circumscribed women’s choices to such a degree that the very of idea of choice seemed to preclude, rather than allow, greater reproductive agency. In other words, choice became a reproductive trap for women, holding over them the shame of making the wrong choice. Women weren’t

making reproductive choices so much as they were making the choice to be good girls or selfish women.

Sex and the “Selfish” Girl

Where Are My Children? presents the earliest existing depiction of the theme of abortion in American film. Lois Weber, the film’s writer, director, and producer, holds a unique place in film history. She was one of America’s earliest and most successful filmmakers. As Anthony Slide puts it, “Along with D.W. Griffith, Lois Weber was American cinema’s first genuine auteur, a filmmaker involved in all aspects of production and one who utilized the motion picture to put across her own ideas and philosophies” (29). By 1916 she was the highest paid director at Universal Studios and the highest paid female director. Although she has largely been forgotten in film history, during the teens, she was as famous as D.W. Griffin and Cecil B. de Mille.⁵⁸

As recent scholars such as Ann Kaplan, Anthony Slide, Linda Seger, and Janet Staiger have engaged in recovery projects of early twentieth-century female directors and their place in film history, Weber’s personal politics and their affect on her films have

⁵⁸ According to Linda Seger, Weber, the first American-born female director, began her career as an actress for Herbert Blache with Gaumont’s American subsidiary. She began writing and directing films in the early 1910s and by 1916, she was the most powerful director at Universal Studios, making over \$5000 a week. In 1917, she formed her own production company and garnered a five-picture contract with Paramount Studios. As Seger points out, her films and her role in the history of the film industry are significant not simply because of her gender but also because “she brought an important new point of view to movie-making, tackling controversial social issues such as birth control, divorce, abortion, and promiscuity. Weber set the stage for the many social films that followed, and established film as socially relevant, provocative, and influential” (8). Despite the fact that her earlier works were widely successful, by the twenties her work began to fall out of favor, perhaps because of “a certain heavy-handedness with her social themes that no longer interested audiences” (8). Her last two films, in 1927 and 1934, were failures both with audiences and critics. Nonetheless, her impact on film history is significant; she directed over one hundred films in her lifetime and ushered in an age of provocative and socially relevant filmmaking. For a full discussion of Weber’s place in the film industry history, see Seger’s *When Women Called the Shots* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1996).

been the subject of increasing critical scrutiny.⁵⁹ Her films gained notoriety for their illicit and sexually-explicit materials. Her 1914 film *Hypocrites* featured the first nude love scene in American film (Seger 199). *Where Are My Children?*, while commercially successful, was enormously controversial and even featured a disclaimer prior to screening about the “illicit” nature of its subject matter.

Ann Kaplan has argued that the film “contains contradictory discourses arising from the context of the film’s production, cultural preoccupations of the period, and Weber’s idiosyncratic concerns” (132). Kaplan attributes the dual nature of the film—one thread of the plot deals with the trial of a lawyer prosecuted for disseminating birth control to the poor occupants of a tenement and the other with the upper-class lawyer and his wife, who we learn is secretly having illegal abortions to avoid the responsibility of being a mother—to Weber’s “own puritanical Christian values,” which “account for her strong identification with a familiar construction—that of the virtuous working classes, and a wasteful, idle upper class” (132). Her argument that “the film is split between a conservative, male-identified address in the upper-class story that is the main plot, and female-identified and more radical address in the sub-plot concerning a working class mother and child” (132), along with Anthony Slide’s reference to Weber as a “gentle propagandist” and his highlighting of her opposition to capital punishment and support of

⁵⁹ Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1992); Anthony Slide, *The Silent Feminists: America’s First Women Directors* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996); Linda Seger, *When Women Called the Shots*; and Janet Stagner, *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

birth control for women, serves as evidence not only of the recovery of Weber but also of the critical rehabilitation of her image and reshaping of her into a feminist film icon.⁶⁰

The trouble with that rehabilitation is the troubling sexual and reproductive politics of her film *Where Are My Children?* Despite readings of the film's politics as either confused or as more the result of the studio system machinations than a reflection of Weber's own political leanings, the film is unrelenting in its clear, eugenically-motivated and classist themes, none of which are unique or novel for their times. The advocacy of birth control in the film, like the popular movement for birth control at the time, is limited to poor women, and the villainous abortion-seeking women of the film are of the leisure class, motivated by selfishness and the unnatural desire to avoid the responsibilities of being a mother.

The historical evidence does indicate that, contrary to the image of the seduced and abandoned single young girl forced to the crime of abortion by desperation that was so popular with the press, most of the women who had abortions in the early twentieth century were indeed married women and this trend continued until after World War II (Reagan). Demographic evidence based on class is even more difficult to determine in the case of illegal abortions, as women of the middle- and upper-classes had greater access to qualified doctors and therefore potentially had fewer complications and a lower rate of mortality, a primary means by which statistics about illegal abortions were

⁶⁰ The critical debate about Weber's personal politics and their affect on her films is still developing. Kaplan, despite her assessment of Weber's "puritanical Christian values," argues that Weber's films reflected a negotiation between herself and the studios, and as a result, are more complex than they appear in her films. Janet Stagner argues the "film is remarkable in changing course midway through the film," and sees the dual plot as a result of the "unexamined" racism and classism of its eugenic argument. For a full discussion of Weber's personal politics, see the following works: Ann Kaplan's *Motherhood and Representation*; Janet Stagner's *Bad Women: Regulating in Early American Film*; Anthony Slide's *The Silent Feminists: American's First Women Directors*; Linda Seger's *When Women Called the Shots*.

obtained. However, one study done of ten thousand working-class clients of Margaret Sanger's birth control clinic found that twenty percent had had an abortion, whereas a 1920s survey of educated middle-class women indicates that around ten to twenty percent had had an abortion performed.⁶¹ While these numbers certainly are not definitive, they do indicate that middle- and upper-class women were certainly no more likely than working class women to have abortions, and in fact, were potentially less likely to do so.

This is supported by the historical argument that suggests that upper- and middle-class women were probably more successful than their working-class counterparts in getting physicians to prescribe birth control for them. Because of their greater ability to influence their doctors, upper- and middle-class women were most likely better able to gain access to birth control and therefore less likely to need to use abortion as a method of reproductive control. In addition, while married women were more likely to have an abortion than single women, for the vast majority of them, abortion was used as a method of birth control only after the desired family size had been reached.⁶²

The historical reality of who was actually having abortions and for what reasons, though, is not the concern of the film. The film, instead, is committed to advocating for birth control for the poor on eugenics grounds, while simultaneously vilifying women of

⁶¹ Marie E. Kopp, *Birth Control in Practice: Analysis of Ten Thousand Case Histories of the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau* (1934; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1972), 124; Katherine Bement Davis, *Factors in the Sex Life of Twenty-Two Hundred Women* (1929; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1972), xi-xiii, 20, 21; Gilbert Van Tassel Hamilton, *A Research in Marriage* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1929), as cited in Leslie Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime*, 133-134. Reagan notes that an additional issue in discussing abortion rates by class is the difference between individual rates of abortions and total number of abortions. Some evidence indicates that affluent women had abortions at a greater rate but that working class black and white women had a greater total number of pregnancies because they were pregnant more frequently. This data supports the idea that affluent women had greater access to other forms of birth control, and that abortion for them functioned as an occasional form of birth control when other measures failed, whereas for working class women without access to other measures, it functioned as their primary means of controlling reproduction.

⁶² See Reagan for a more complete discussion of the complex relationship between class and access to abortion and birth control.

the upper class for being “social butterflies” and refusing to procreate. Echoing Theodore Roosevelt’s claims that America’s “rapid decline of the birth-rate...inevitably signalizes race decay, and ...racial death,” the film attributes this decline, as Roosevelt puts it, as “due to coldness, to selfishness, to love of ease, to shrinking from risk, to an utter and pitiful failure in sense of perspective and in power of weighting what really makes the highest joy, and to a rooting out of the sense of duty or a twisting of that sense into improper channels” (qtd. in Tone 160). These traits—coldness, selfishness, love of ease—define the affluent and privileged women of the film.

The opening of the film sets up the eugenic terms of both its pro-birth-control and anti-abortion narratives. The film opens with the subtitle, “Behind the great portals of eternity, the souls, another of little children waited to be born.” As we learn, these souls in heaven are divided: “Within the first space was the great army of ‘chance children’” who “went forth to earth in vast numbers.” However, “then came those sad ‘unwanted’ souls that were constantly sent back. They were marked morally or physically defective and bore the sign of the serpent.” Lastly, there were the wanted ones: “And then in the secret place of the most high were those souls, fine and strong, that were only sent forth on prayer. They were marked with the approval of the almighty.” This conception of souls as divided into “physically and morally defective” or “fine and strong” sets up the eugenic argument of the film that access to birth control should be determined by the genetic quality of the potential offspring. The film, though, sentimentalizes this argument by relying on the narrative trope, carried throughout the film, of these reproductive choices as representing “souls” depicted as angels.

The pro-birth control part of the dual narrative of the film is carried out in the courtroom. Richard Walton, a district attorney described as a “great believer in eugenics,” defends a doctor, also a proponent of eugenics, who is accused of disseminating immoral materials by distributing birth control information to the community’s poor. The doctor on trial asserts, “I am accused of distributing indecent literature because I advocate birth regulation. The law should help instead of hinder me.” A close up of a page from his book reveals his clearly stated eugenic argument for birth control: “When only those children who are wanted are born the race will conquer the evils that weigh it down.”

The trial scene upholds this eugenic argument by including flashbacks of the horrors the doctor witnessed in the city tenements, narratively attributed to the lack of adequate family planning. A montage of domestic scenes of violence, poverty, and despair, husbands and wives abusing each other, and children as dirty, neglected, and abused provide “evidence” for the doctor’s views of these people’s unfitnes to reproduce. The doctor asserts that he was often witness to these scenes, as “[his] work among the poor often took [him] to the slums.” It is “these conditions” that proved to the doctor “the necessity of world wide enlightenment on the subject of birth control.” Another cut to a close-up of his book reveals the cause of this suffering: “Because men and women are ignorant and undisciplined does it follow that unwanted children should be born to suffer blindness, disease or insanity?” The occupants of the tenements are clearly dysgenic, and the viewer is encouraged to reach the same conclusions about the need for their access to birth control that the doctor has put forth.

To underscore the connection between this world of dysgenic reproduction and its anti-abortion message, the film moves from this courtroom scene to the revelation that “it was a great disappointment to the district attorney that his wife was childless.” However, unlike the pro-birth control side of the narrative, the anti-abortion narrative is played out predominantly in the home. When Mrs. Walton is introduced, she is shown lying on the family home’s terrace, lounging on a chaise sofa, feeding candy to a pair of small dogs. In her indolent and idle lounging, she is the picture of leisure and class privilege. The sumptuous nature of the leisure activities and the reposed nature of her lounging mark her as sensual and even sexually suspect, while the devotion to and pampering of her pets indicate the displacement of her appropriate maternal energies onto inappropriate objects.

Even further, her morally suspect life of leisure is revealed as a matter of “fault” in the film. The film narrates that “never dreaming that it was her fault, her husband concealed his disappointment” about their lack of children. The language of “fault” here sets up the other side of this dual narrative—that of the “selfish” woman who, while eugenically and financially able to have children, chooses not to. Mr. Walton’s sister provides yet another counterpoint to Mrs. Walton, which further underscores the selfishness of her choice. When his sister and her husband arrive for a visit with their new baby, the film narrates, “Walton’s sister had contracted an eugenic marriage and her first child was a source of great interest.” Mr. Walton comes over to the infant and, as Weber describes in the script, “looks lovingly at the child.”⁶³ Mrs. Walton, on the other hand, appears in the scene carrying her dog in her arms as if it were an infant. The message here is clear: Mrs. Walton has perverted her natural maternal desires and channeled them into inappropriate objects—her pets—all in a selfish effort to avoid the

⁶³ Lois Weber, *Where Are My Children?* film script, 1917, Library of Congress.

demands of motherhood, and in the process, denies her husband the eugenically desirable children he so desires and deserves.

This scene also provides an important contrast between the eugenically-conceived baby, with its full, pink cheeks and cherubic face, and the baby featured in the earlier tenement scene, with its sallow, wan, thin cheeks and unhealthy physical appearance, and depicts how allowing access to birth control for the masses will prevent the birth of these less desirable babies, these “physically and morally defective souls,” leaving reproduction in the hands of those women eugenically fit for it.

As Mrs. Warner’s unnatural leisure indicates, however, there is another problem preventing this utopic reproductive ideal—the selfishness of this “better class” of women. The next scene in the movie begins at the home of Mrs. William Brandt, Mrs. Walton’s “bosom friend.” Mrs. Brandt, like Mrs. Walton, is introduced lying reposed on a settee. The film fades up on clouds and an angel appears at the portals of the opening of the film. The film cuts to a close up of Mrs. Brandt, to whom a vision of the angel’s face appears over her shoulder and whispers in her ear. This is the film’s narrative trope to describe a woman’s learning that she is “with child.” Mrs. Brandt, as is described in the script, is “angry” and “impatient” at this revelation, and clearly unhappy at the thought of being pregnant. When another lady invites the women to a house party, Mrs. Brandt is “peevish” and “discontented.” The film narrates these events to show that her desire to avoid children results from her desire for social amusements. Like Roosevelt, the film depicts these women as avoiding motherhood purely out of a selfish and frivolous love of enjoyment.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ The complicated and gendered relationship between women, sexuality, and leisure in the early twentieth century has been the subject of several compelling books. See Kathy Peiss’s *Cheap Amusements*

The film's argument for how these women avoid motherhood centers solely on the issue of abortion. It is Mrs. Walton, of course, who offers the solution to her friend's troubles—a visit to Dr. Malfit, a name that implies how he has “mal-fitted” his medical training to serve immoral purposes. The visit to his office reveals that, while some women look uneasy or uncomfortable, Mrs. Walton is all too familiar with his practice, as she yawns while flipping through a magazine in the waiting area.

Weber further vilifies her by contrasting her casual and cavalier attitude towards terminating pregnancies with Mr. Walton's evident paternal longing and desire for offspring. Several scenes in the film involve shots of small children playing in the neighbor's yard and close-ups of Mr. Walton gazing at them longingly. One such scene depicting his desire for children is interspersed with the “result” from Mrs. Brandt's abortion. The film cuts to an angel rising alone through the clouds. The portals appear and close as the angel disappears. The subtitle, “one of the ‘Unwanted Ones’ returns and a social butterfly is again ready for house parties,” appears on the scene. The message is clear—these “social butterflies” choose their social lives and the gaiety and frivolity of them over their duty to be mothers, the husbands' desires, and the lives of these “angels.”

In a heavy-handed use of dramatic irony, the film cuts back to Mr. Walton again longingly watching the children play, and he says to the neighbor, “We plan to have a dozen of these little angels in time.” Although he is unaware of her visits to Dr. Malfit, the audience is all too aware that her nonchalant visit to the doctor's office, and her knowledge of the illegal services he offers, indicate the true reason for their current lack

(Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986) and Nan Enstad's *Ladies of Labors, Girls of Adventure* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) for a couple of provocative works on the topic.

of children. Clearly, if his wife has any say in it, and because of Dr. Malfit and her reproductive choices she does, they will not “have half a dozen of these little angels.”

The climax of the movie occurs when Mrs. Walton’s brother, a rake who is visiting, seduces Lillian, the young daughter of their housekeeper. As the subtitle notes, “It was the old, old tragedy and one of the ‘unwanted ones’ was called to earth.” When he goes to his sister with his troubles, Mrs. Walton once again offers Dr. Malfit’s services as a solution. This time, however, “the obliging Dr. Malfit bungled,” and “Lillian lived long enough to tell her broken-hearted mother the truth.” Although Mr. Walton does not immediately learn of his wife’s involvement in this affair, he does learn of the doctor who performed the botched abortion, and “through Walton’s efforts Dr. Malfit was quickly brought to trial.”

It is through this legal action that Mr. Walton learns of his wife’s deceit. When Dr. Malfit is sentenced to fifteen years, in a last act of vengeance, he says to Mr. Walton, “Before sitting in judgment of others, you should see to your own household.”⁶⁵ The film cuts to a close up of Mr. Walton who glances at the ledger Malfit put before him, revealing the name “Mrs. Richard Walton” and the entries of “To Professional Services.....\$50.00” listed twice. He also sees a listing for Mrs. Brandt before throwing the ledger down in disgust.

The final scene in the film ends with Mr. Walton confronting Mrs. Walton. Returning home, he find his wife entertaining her friends, and says to them all, “I have just learned why so many of you are childless! I should bring you to trial, but I shall

⁶⁵ Despite the fact that in this fictive trial, the abortionist was found guilty, the historical evidence suggests that even in cases that resulted in patient death, prosecution and conviction rates for doctors who performed abortions remained low. Reagan attributes this low rate of conviction to the popular culture’s view of abortion, which consistently failed to view abortion in moral terms until well into the twentieth century.

content myself with asking you to leave my house!” After the women leave, he turns to his wife and delivers the title line of the film: “Where are my children?” Her reaction shows her remorse and shame at her actions. Mr. Walton, though, is greatly angry and exclaims, “I—an officer of the law—must shield a murderess!” She pleads at his feet, but he simply turns his back, walks out of the room, and shuts the door. She faints and sinks to the floor and the picture fades out. The scene ends on the subtitle, “All night long Richard Walton grieved for his lost children and his lost faith in the woman who should have been their mother.”

Ultimately, “seeing how much a family means to him and really loving her husband, Mrs. Walton decides to conquer her selfishness and prepare for motherhood.” And of course, even when Mrs. Walton becomes contrite and remorseful of her actions and, “prayerfully now...sought the blessing she had refused,” “the portals remained closed to her forever.” She is doomed in the film to be forever punished for her reproductive choices. I have described the melodramatic finale of the film in some detail to fully show the punitive, shaming, and castigating nature of the ending. The film serves as a cautionary tale for married women of the middle- and upper classes. The message is clear: if you make selfish reproductive choices, you risk losing the ability to reproduce forever. If you deny your husband his rightful offspring, you will face the shame that comes from his recrimination: “Throughout the years, she must face the silent question, “Where are my children?”

Weber’s film perverts the historical facts about who actually had abortions and their motivations for doing so in order to politicize women’s reproductive choices. In doing so, she reveals how this new fictive treatment of reproductive “choices” was rooted

in a socially conservative framing of these choices within already established gendered, racialized, and class-based tropes. Women who choose to have abortions are selfish women, doing what they wanted instead of what is in the best interest of their society, their unborn children, and their husbands. Weber's film performs two significant actions in the early treatment of the notion of reproductive choices—it both depicts reproduction as something about which women have choices and it creates a gendered and eugenically-driven ideology about those choices. Under this new reproductive paradigm, some choices are inherently “good” and some choices are “selfish.”

“You’re a Good Girl, Charity”

Edith Wharton's 1917 novel *Summer*, although it caused a sensation when it was published because of its frank depiction of sexuality, has since fallen out of favor in Wharton criticism.⁶⁶ However, the novel provides one of the frankest and earliest depictions of a heroine's struggle with an unplanned pregnancy and one of the few early

⁶⁶ Much of the criticism of the novel deals with issues of race, class, and gender. Elizabeth Ammon has argued that the novel represents a horrific reworking of the incest plot of the sentimental novel, resulting in the “sick” union of Charity and Mr. Royall. Dale Bauer sees Edith Wharton's work as engaged in an “argument with new America,” one in which Wharton saw the eugenics craze as both “symptom” and “symbol” of America's attempt to “localize and totalize its new social problems”(28). Jennie Kassanoff's work *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race* takes issue with the way that these readings conceal Wharton's radical conservatism. Arguing that “*Summer* answers the chaotic multiplicity of war with a conservation paeon to the racial uniformity of the old home,” Kassanoff sees Wharton's “commitment to generational continuity triumphing over her feminist individualism”(119, 148). See Elizabeth Ammons's *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980); Dale Bauer's *Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994); Jennie Kassanoff's *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Jennifer Haytock's *Edith Wharton and the Conversations of Literary Modernism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Rhonda Skillern's “Becoming a “Good Girl”: Law, Language, and Ritual in Edith Wharton's *Summer*,” *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Kathleen Pfeiffer's “Summer and Its Critics Discomfort,” *Women's Studies* 20 (1991):141-52, for critical discussions of Wharton's *Summer*.

twentieth century works that deals with a heroine expressly contemplating whether or not to terminate a pregnancy.

The novel centers on the story of Charity Royall, a young woman living in the remote mountain town of North Dormer.⁶⁷ Charity, we learn, was born “up the mountain,” a place depicted in the novel as backwards, almost subhuman. She is rescued from her terrible fate and brought “down the mountain” to North Dormer by the town lawyer, Mr. Royall and his wife, described as a mousy, down-trodden woman. After Mrs. Royall’s death, Mr. Royall, a brutal and difficult man, raises Charity alone, although their relationship is depicted as intensely strained and contentious. Charity meets Harney, a young architect from the city, who sweeps her off her feet, and they have a passionate, and ultimately failed, relationship. Facing the fact of her unplanned pregnancy and determined to keep her baby, she marries Mr. Royal to preserve her reputation and provide for her child. In many ways, it is the classic seduction narrative.

However, Wharton’s take on the seduction story reveals the importance of this novel and how it contributes to an understanding of the politics of reproductive choice in the Progressive Era. Unlike earlier seduction narratives, Charity has choices.

⁶⁷ Kathy Peiss describes the culture of “treating” that emerged in the early twentieth century. The origin of modern dating traditions, this practice involved young men “treating” girls to leisure activities as a way of indicating romantic and social interest. Treating created confusing sexual norms for young, working class girls who were entreated to remain sexually pure but who saw the benefit of being the recipient of “treating,” as well as the sexual obligation that accompanied it. The term “charity girl” came to be used to for girls who “bought fully into the culture of treating” and traded amusement and trinkets for sexual favors. Such women were distinct socially from women who engaged in “occasional” prostitution as a means of supplementing their incomes but existed in a socially suspect space. While it’s unclear if the choice of “Charity” for the main character of the novel is a deliberate reverence to these “charity girls” or not, there does seem to be similarities between the character of Charity in the novel and the perception of these girls. Particularly suggestive of this association is Charity and Harney’s trip to Nettleton, where Harney “treats” Charity to a fancy lunch complete with wine and buys her an “expensive” trinket, a ring. This trip also marks the beginning of their sexual relationship, a connection that further implicates her as a “charity girl.” Peiss’s assertion of “the intricacies this negotiation—of the balancing act between social respectability, female desire, and male pressures” certainly seems to refer to Charity’s position as she navigates, largely without guidance, the social and sexual terrain of young womanhood (112).

Specifically, she has the choice to continue the pregnancy to term or to terminate the fetus. The fact that Wharton offers abortion as an option for Charity's age-old plight indicates the "progressive" nature of this novel.

From the start, though, Charity is not depicted as the prototypical heroine of the seduction tale. She is described as having a "small, swarthy face" (2) and "rough dark hair" (88) and her first line in the novel is, "How I hate everything!" (2). In fact, Charity is rather unpleasant. She clearly has a "chip on her shoulder" that manifests itself as a certain unpleasantness and pettiness. She resents everything, including North Dormer for being such a miserable town:

There it lay, a weather-beaten sunburnt village of the hills, abandoned of men, left apart by railway, trolley, telegraph, and all the forces that link life to modern communities. It had no shops, no theatres, no lectures, no 'business block'; only a church that was opened every other Sunday if the state of the roads permitted, and a library for which no new books had been bought for twenty years, and where the old ones mouldered undisturbed on the damp shelves. (3-4)

But she also resents being indebted to Mr. Royall and the town for saving her from her fate on the mountain. As the narrator explains, "Charity Royall had always been told that she ought to consider it a privilege that her lot had been cast in North Dormer. She knew that, compared to the place she had come from, North Dormer represented all the blessings of the most refined civilization"(4). She even resents her job working in the town library, although she enjoys the small amount of personal and financial freedom having employment offers her. Charity, then, is full of anger and resentment, a misanthrope, an unlikeable character. She is not the prototypical heroine of the seduction novel.

In the novel, however, her harsh nature is tied to her suspect background. As the narrator asserts, “Charity was not very clear about the Mountain; but she knew it was a bad place, and a shame to have come from it” (4-5). Like Margaret in Chapter 2, dysgenically marked by disease, Charity is marked by her “bad” past and the “shame” of her clearly dysgenic origins, and also like Margaret, her sexual and reproductive choices are read through the lens of her dysgenic background. Mr. Royall describes the people of the mountain by saying that they “ain’t half human up there” (50-51) and that they were lacking in any sort of natural human emotion or attachment, as evidenced by his claim that her mother “was glad enough to have her go. She’d have given her to anybody”(50). Charity, then, was “the child of a drunken convict and of a mother who wasn’t ‘half-human’”(51).

Given her suspect origins, Charity is particularly concerned in the novel with how others in the town perceive her. As other critics such as Dale Bauer and Rhonda Skillern have noted, Charity’s relationship with Harney is highly sexualized but for her, this sexual relationship is fraught with her dysgenic-coded background. In one particular moment, she contemplates joining him in his bedroom but realizes the consequences of such an action:

One motion of her hand, one tap on the pane, and she could picture the sudden change in his face. In every pulse of her rigid body she was aware of the welcome his eyes and lips would give her; but something kept her from moving. It was not the fear of any sanction, human or heavenly; she had never in her life been afraid. It was simply that she had suddenly understood what would happen if she went in. It was the thing that *did* happen between young men and girls, and that North Dormer ignored in public and snickered over on the sly. It was what Miss Hatchard was still ignorant of, but every girl of Charity’s class knew about before she left school. It was what had happened to Ally Hawes’s sister Julia, and had

ended in her going to Nettleton, and in people's never mentioning her name. (72)⁶⁸

It, of course, was sex. And while Charity asserts that it was not “fear of any sanction” that prevented her from going inside, she knows that the potential result of this action is procreation.

The courting couples of North Dormer are clearly sexually active, if only “on the sly.”⁶⁹ This sexual activity carried the risk of getting caught, the risk of getting pregnant. Julia Hawes and Rose Coles, two unmarried North Dormer girls who get pregnant, offer Charity two possible outcomes for girls who get “caught:” abortion and disgrace or a loveless marriage. Julia Hawes chooses to have an abortion and becomes a prostitute. Rose Coles' forced marriage, on the other hand, is just as miserable and without dignity as Julia's fate:

Distinctly and pitilessly there rose before her the fate of the girl who married ‘to make things right.’ She had seen too many village love-stories end in that way. Poor Rose Coles's miserable marriage was of the number; and what good had come of it for her or for Halston Skeff? They had hated each other from the day the minister married them; and whenever old Mrs. Skeff had a fancy to humiliate her daughter-in-law she had only to say, ‘Who'd ever think the baby's only two? And for a seven months' child—ain't it a wonder what a size he is? (72)

Rose's case fails in every way. Destroying her “village love-story” and causing them to “hate each other,” it does not even preserve her dignity or shield her from idle village gossip. After all, her mother-in-law knows that her past sexual indiscretions serve nicely

⁶⁸ Bauer discusses the role of mothers in the novel and argues that lack of “good mothers” in the novel “leads to Wharton's drama of cultural scapegoating of ‘bad mothers,’ whose laxity and degenerate behavior were all considered signs of greater dysgenic decline” (30). The lack of available mother figures, and their guidance, in the novel heightens Charity's precarious social and sexual positions. The available mother figures fail in every way to help prevent Charity's fall—Miss Hatchard, through her lack of sexual knowledge and inability to protect Charity from Mr. Royall's advances, Rose Coles' mother-in-law, through her use of sexual history as a social weapon, and both her biological and adoptive mothers, through their abandonment through desertion and death.

⁶⁹ See Kathy Peiss's *Cheap Amusements* for a more complete discussion of changing dating and sexual practices of the Progressive Era.

as a social weapon. It is no wonder then that Charity finds it difficult to determine whose case is more miserable and “had always suspected that the shunned Julia’s fate might have its compensations”(49).

Wharton is clear about “what had happened to Ally Hawes’s sister Julia” and what “had ended in her going to Nettleton,” a carefully grammatically constructed sentence that suggests, not just what action (sex) had ended in going to Nettleton but *what* “had ended” in Nettleton—the pregnancy. As we later learn, and is also referenced by Ally, who says she will “always remember that awful time I went down with Julia—to that doctor’s” (88), “that” doctor is an abortionist. Charity’s early feelings about Julia’s plight—“Poor Julia!” Charity sighed from the height of her purity and her security” (88)—indicate Charity’s pre-sexual and socially secure position. Her feeling that “the pity of it was that girls like Julia did not know how to choose, and to keep bad fellows at a distance,” (88) invokes the classic societal response to the “girl in trouble” scenario. She simply didn’t know “how to choose.” Charity, though, knows that she has chosen a young man who “wore city clothes” and was from a good family. She feels immune to the dangers of Julia’s situation.

It is significant, then, that the first time that Charity sees the abortionist’s office is on an illicit trip taken with Harney to visit Nettleton for the Forth of July fireworks. The building is described as a “brick house with a conspicuous black and gold sign across its front, ‘Dr. Merkle; Private Consultations at all hours. Lady Attendants’” (98). Seeing the house, she remembers, “Ally Hawkes’s words: ‘The house was at the corner of Wing Street and Lake Avenue...there’s a big black sign across the front...’” and the sight of the house causes “through all the heat and the rapture a shiver of cold ran over her” (98).

It is hardly coincidental, then, that it is in this context, this town, that the sexual nature of their relationship begins to escalate. Although “in most of the village friendships between youths and maidens lack of conversation was made up for by tentative fondling,” “Harney ... had never put his arm about her, or sought to betray her into any sudden caress”(91). This lack of physical contact changes, however, during the train ride to the town: “Now and then a lurch of the train flung her against Harney, and through her thin muslin she felt the touch of his sleeve. She steadied herself, their eyes met, and the flaming breath of the day seemed to enclose them” (92).

It is during the firework finale, though, that the sexual nature of their relationship really begins to escalate. The fireworks serve as an extended metaphor for their developing sexual relationship, and the description of the fireworks is filled with sexual language—the references to “throbbed,” “pressed,” and “rapture” serve as examples. The metaphor of the fireworks’ finale as a sexual release is also apparent. The fact that it ended in Harney and Charity’s first kiss, a kiss described as a passionate one that “revealed” a new, “dominant” Harney to her, as well as a “new mysterious power” clearly indicates her dawning awareness of their sexual relationship.

What makes this passage even more significant than Wharton’s frank depiction of a young woman’s burgeoning sexuality is the context in which this moment occurs and the narrative results of the awakening of this sexuality. Directly after this moment, Charity and Harney come face to face with the “seedy” side of sexuality in the form of the infamous Julia Hawes and a drunken Mr. Royall. Charity sees Julia, noting that her face has “lost her freshness” and whose “paint under her eyes made her face seem thinner”(102), after the fireworks, with “her white feather askew, and the face under

flushed with coarse laughter”(105). Julia is part of a gang of rowdy youths with whom her guardian is drunkenly associating, and the scene devolves into his shouting furiously at Charity, “You whore—you damn—bare-headed whore, you!”(106).

Charity suddenly had a vision of herself, hatless, disheveled, with a man’s arm about her, confronting that drunken crew, headed by her guardian’s pitiable figure. The picture filled her with shame. She had known since childhood about Mr. Royall’s “habits”: had seen him, as she went up to bed, sitting morosely in his office, a bottle at his elbow; or coming home, heavy and quarrelsome, from his business expeditions to Hepburn or Springfield; but the idea of his associating himself publicly with a band of disreputable girls and bar-room loafers was new and dreadful to her. (106)

The shame that Charity feels in this moment significantly gestures toward the shame that she feels about her dysgenic origins. The novel reveals how the sexual and reproductive choices for Charity are circumscribed by her these origins.

The truth is, however, that Charity has more in common with the “disreputable girls” than she might like to believe, a fact underscored by her concern with what people would say about her when word of this incident reached North Dormer. Charity’s “tainted” origins mean that her sexual choices will be read by the people of the town within that existing essentialized context. Whereas Julia is a good girl gone bad, a fact supported by her sister’s continued position as a “good girl” in the town, Charity’s sexual behavior will only serve to reinforce her already suspect background. The “shame” that she feels from Mr. Royall’s consorting with this “band of disreputable girls” results from the shame that she feels from having been “caught” “hatless, disheveled, with a man’s arm about her.” Her sexual shame is magnified by the shame of her origins.

However, despite the warning that this scene might occasion for her, she continues on her path of sexual awakening, meeting with Harney in a primitive house in the woods for their sexual rendezvous. To make even clearer the sexual and romantic

nature of these meetings in the woods, the room was “furnished in primitive camping fashion. In the window was a table, also made of boards, with an earthenware jar holding a big bunch of wild asters, two canvas chairs stood near by, and in one corner was a mattress with a Mexican blanket over it” (127). Even further, her sexual awakening continued in the house in the woods: “He had his arms about her, and his kisses were in her hair and lips. Under his touch things deep in her struggled to the light and sprang up like flowers in sunshine” (130). Wharton, however, does not allow this sexual awakening without a price.

Finding herself in the classic seduction plot, Charity realizes not only that she is pregnant but that, like Julia, she in fact does not know “how to choose.” Harney, she learns, is engaged to another, and to make matters even worse, to a girl of his own social standing. Charity resolves not to trap Harney into marriage with the pregnancy, which as she realizes solves very little—she knew the “sorry fate” of the girl “who was married ‘to make things right’” and “had seen too many village love-stories end in that way” after all to see that as a viable option.

The question for Charity is what to do now. Faced with the classic fate of the girl in the seduction tale—abandoned with an unwanted pregnancy—Charity, unlike earlier heroines, is faced with reproductive choices. Her subsequent visit to the abortionist seems to indicate a willingness to consider ending the pregnancy as an option. However, the scene in the doctor’s office suggest otherwise:

This woman with the false hair, the false teeth, the false murderous smile—what was she offering her but immunity from some unthinkable crime? Charity, till then, had been conscious only of a vague self-disgust and a frightening physical distress; now, of a sudden, there came to her the grave surprise of motherhood. She had come to this dreadful place because she knew of no other way of making sure that she was not

mistaken about her state; and the woman had taken her for a miserable creature like Julia... The thought was so horrible that she sprang up, white and shaking, one of her great rushes of anger sweeping over her. (160)

Charity's fear that the doctor mistakes her for a "miserable creature," seeking "immunity" from a "crime" indicates the extent to which Charity's choices are constrained by the shame she feels because of her dysgenic background. Her sexuality and reproductive choices are not hers to make freely—her fear that they will be read through the lens of her suspect status as "undesirable other" precludes her from choosing the option that perhaps would be "best" for her personally.

Charity refuses to terminate her pregnancy, deciding instead to marry Mr. Royall, a man whom she had described as a "horrible old man" who fills her with "disgust." Perhaps the primary question that occupies critics of the novel is why Charity makes the choice she does.⁷⁰ Her "choice," though, is constrained by the racially-motivated narrative of dysgenic reproduction that surrounds her mountain past. Indeed, any interaction with the "mountain people" in the novel underscores their less than fully human status and reifies the "tainted" nature of her "origin." When Charity takes Harney, an aspiring architect, to visit local places of interest, some of which are in the mountains, these trips expose the "inhuman" nature of the mountaineers. In one such trip, the narrator describes the following scene: "The place was bare and miserable and the air heavy with the smell of dirt and stale tobacco. Charity's heart sank. Old derided tales of the Mountain people came back to her, and the woman's stare was so

⁷⁰ Several critics have commented on Wharton's use of the nineteenth century trope of the incest plot in sentimental novels. See Elizabeth Barnes' *Incest and the Literary Imagination* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2002) and Cindy Weinstein's *Family, Kinship, and Sympathy in Nineteenth-century American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) for a discussion of this narrative trope in the nineteenth century. See Elizabeth Ammons, Jennie Kassonoff, Kathleen Pfeiffer, and Rhonda Skillern for a discussion of the incest plot in *Summer* and the degree to which Charity's choice to marry Mr. Royall can be seen as "resisting" or as a "willing abdication of Charity's independence and autonomy" (Kassonoff 147).

disconcerting, and the face of the sleeping man so sodden and bestial, that her disgust was tinged with a vague dread” (57). Further, “The sight of the weak-minded old woman, of the cowed children, and the ragged man sleeping off his liquor, made the setting of her own life seem a vision of peace, and plenty” (58). And even though she repeated to herself, “This is where I belong—this is where I belong,” “every instinct and habit made her a stranger among these poor swamp people living like vermin in their lair”(59). Charity has so internalized the shame of her origins that even as she attempts to connect herself to them by repeating that she “belongs” there, she vilifies and dehumanizes the mountain people as “vermin.”

In facing her choices, though, she attempts to embrace her dysgenic past in order to embrace her dysgenic reproduction. After she learns of her pregnancy and of Harney’s engagement to the woman from his own “circle,” Charity determines to go back to the mountain to her own people. Again depicting the biological nature of her connection to the mountain people, it was “something in her blood” that made the Mountain the “only answer to her questioning”(167). She felt that as “she herself had been born as her own baby was going to be born; and whatever her mother’s subsequent life had been, she could hardly help remembering the past, and receiving a daughter who was facing the trouble she had known”(171). However, in keeping with the “inhumanity” of the people of the Mountain, Charity finds no comfort or solace in her mother’s arms. Instead, she finds that her mother has died, and even in her death, there is precious little humanity:

A woman lay on [the bed], but she did not look like a dead woman; she seemed to have fallen across her squalid bed in a drunken sleep, and to have been left lying where she fell, in her ragged disordered clothes. One arm was flung above her head, one leg drawn under a torn skirt that left the other leg bare to the knee: a swollen glistening leg with a ragged rolled

down about the ankle. The woman lay on her back, her eyes staring up unblinkingly at the candle that trembled in Mr. Miles's hand. (177)

To make even more clear the inhuman nature of the woman's body in death, Wharton notes that "there was no sign in it of anything human: she lay there like a dead dog in a ditch" (178). Charity's inability to recognize the humanity of these people indicates the extent to which she has internalized the dysgenic narratives about them, and as a result, is unable to accept this return as a legitimate option. Charity's plan of returning to her "folks," then, is short-circuited, not only by her mother's death, but by the very lack of identifiable, human bonds between the people in the house: "But she could not make out what relationship these people bore to each other, or to her dead mother; they seemed to be herded together in a passive promiscuity in which their common misery was the strongest link" (184). Despite the fact that nothing but a life of "misery" awaits Charity at the bottom of the mountain, Charity rejects this misery in favor of a more socially acceptable one—one of continuing an unwanted pregnancy and entering into an unhappy, façade of a marriage with a man she despises.

Charity's choice is less about the choice to continue or to terminate her pregnancy and more about her choice between her "nature," represented by her mountain origin, and her "upbringing," represented by returning to the town and to Mr. Royall. Charity's deep shame of her dysgenic origins results in her fear that terminating her pregnancy would make her exactly the sort of "miserable creature" that she witnessed on the mountain. The choice to continue the pregnancy and to marry Mr. Royall would align her with the "good" people of the town. It is no wonder that Mr. Royall tells her at the end of the novel, "You're a good girl, Charity." (205). Charity has made a choice—a choice to be a good girl.

“Tainted” Choices

Ultimately, as Jennifer Haytock notes, “Despite the freedoms of the New Woman and the flapper, Wharton suggests that women have few good choices” (73). Caught between the immoralities of the Julias and the Mrs. Warners of the world, the “good girls” like Charity were forced to choose middle-class respectability, marriage, and security, even if it meant giving up their hard-won sexual, personal, and domestic freedoms. Despite recognizing the liberating potential of birth control and abortion, women risked being seen as prostitutes or “selfish” social butterflies if they chose those options. The sexual freedom of the early twentieth century caused women to shed the mask of passionlessness but with it went, conversely, the screen that masked their use of birth control. Birth control and abortion became what it was—a way for sexual women to avoid or delay motherhood.

In both the film and the novel, reproduction is presented to the audience and reader, not as a perhaps unfortunate biological and medical certainty, but as a something about which women—married women, single girls—have choices. These choices, though, are not freely made. They are constrained by, and read through the lens of, the gendered, racialized, and class-based ideologies of the time. As a result, while the movement to view reproduction as involving choices is a significant one in the history of reproductive rights, these early fictive examples reveal that while the rhetoric of choice would appear to allow greater personal agency and reproductive autonomy, in practice, the socially-conservative ideologies of race, class, and gender in the Progressive Era inscribed reproductive choices with meanings that circumvented reproductive freedom.

The film and the novel make the new message of reproductive choice clear—the choice to continue or terminate a pregnancy is not without negative, societal consequences.

Women who choose wrongly risked being judged as selfish or worse.

In the novel, Charity herself is able to identify reproduction as a choice for others but is unable to apply this logic to herself. Too constrained by the social construction of herself as biologically “tainted,” her only option is to continue her pregnancy or else risk being a “bad girl.” As she asserts about Julia Hawes, her problem is that she doesn’t know how to choose. All the options that she tries leads her back to the traditional patriarchal order, represented by Mr. Royall. This ultimate labeling of her as a “good girl” by him indicates the patriarchal approval of her reproductive choice.

The fact that Charity chooses to be a “good girl” and continue her pregnancy, despite her dysgenic background, exposes the fissures of this new rhetoric, however. After all, according to someone like Weber, Charity makes the wrong choice. Charity’s choice, then, reveals the inherent problem with masking reproductive duty in the guise of reproductive choice. You run the risk that women will choose wrongly.

In the end the eugenic messages of the film and the novel serve less as ways to make claims about race and class and more as ways to control women’s reproductive choices. Ultimately, whether you are a good girl or a selfish woman seems to come down to whether you choose to reproduce.

Chapter 5: Reproductive Control Gets Personal: The Paternal Longing, “New” Fatherhood, and Women’s Reproductive Choices

Running alongside the narratives about changes in women’s sexuality, reproductive control, and the family is a narrative about the emergence of a “new” father in the twentieth century. Affected by many of the same factors—changing family demographic patterns, wide scale reshaping of familial dynamics and relationships, and external shifts in economic and political opportunities for both men and women—fatherhood in nineteenth and twentieth century America has emerged as a source of perhaps as much critical scrutiny as motherhood and reproduction. Critics such as David Blankenhorn, Mary P. Ryan, and Mark Carnes have argued that the nineteenth century witnessed a “defathering” of men, a slow but steady erosion of the male’s place in family life.⁷¹ Other historians, such as Ralph LaRossa, Steven Franks, and Steven Mintz dispute this historical view of the declining role of the father and offer their own accounts of how a “new fatherhood” emerged.⁷² While the exact nature of the father’s role in the family and in child rearing remains a subject of critical debate, an examination of the rhetoric of fatherhood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century reveals surprising, and significant, implications for understanding the relationship between cultural changes in the role of the father and the reproductive decisions and choices of women.

As I argue in Chapter 3, the Progressive Era began a process of masking reproductive duty as a reproductive choice. This chapter builds on that argument by

⁷¹ Blankenhorn, David, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995); Ryan, Mary P., *Cradle of the Middle Class* (Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Carnes, Mark, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

⁷² LaRossa, Ralph, *The Modernization of Fatherhood: A Social and Political History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Frank, Stephen, *Life with Father: Parenthood and Masculinity in the Nineteenth-century American North* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); and Mintz, Steven, *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard 2004).

examining how the rhetoric of fatherhood began to change at the same time that these constructions of reproduction as a choice began to emerge. I argue that, contrary to the view that the nineteenth century witnessed a “defathering,” it instead witnessed merely a “different fathering,” the emergence of a new ideal of fatherhood that would come to be termed by its supporters as “new fatherhood” and by its detractors as “maternal fatherhood.”⁷³ This figure of the “new father,” though, had important connections culturally to the changing views of women’s reproductive choices. In constructing a “new father” founded on notion of fathers’ longing for, and immersion in the lives of, their children, society complicated these narratives of women’s reproductive choices by refocusing the cultural longing for offspring on fathers. My argument is that this paternal longing, combined with the increase in the father’s direct role and responsibility for the daily care of his children, emerge out of a culture very much concerned with women’s lack of maternal desire and motivation to reproduce.

Movies, magazines, and books again and again framed this new “maternal father” as a reaction to “the woman who refuses to accept maternity.” Paternal longing and the growing commitment to idea of the father’s responsibility for childcare served as a form of reproductive control for women. The former consisted of an emotional appeal to women to engage in reproduction—i.e. Mr. Walton’s longing for children in *Where Are My Children?*—whereas the latter served as a practical appeal. If fathers are willing to actively engage in the care-taking of infants and children, to be co-parents and not to simply leave the child-rearing to women, then how can the “selfish women” of the film who are avoiding motherhood out of fear of the burdens that that position will place on them continue to deny their husbands children? After all, as the writer of a 1932 column

⁷³ Letter to the editor, *Hygeia* (1942), as cited in LaRossa, *Modernization of Fatherhood*, (87).

“Confessions of New Father” for the “For Father’s Only” series in *Parents’ Magazine* asserts, “the first year of baby’s life is the hardest for Mother and Father and Baby, but it can be one of the happiest if *you* get into the game” (6). If fathers are going to “get into the game” when it comes time to actually take care of the baby, then shouldn’t women give them the chance to play?

In making this argument that paternal longing and a new, more active ideal of fatherhood functioned as a form of societal reproductive control, I am not denying the very real effect that this shift in fatherhood had for men, children, and families. New fatherhood allowed men to develop personally, and culturally, significant relationships with their children, relationships that helped provide the foundation for the new compassionate family of the twentieth century, and later the second-wave feminist movement’s seismic shift in the structure of marriage and family life, a shift that benefited women, men, and children in a myriad of ways. In other words, this new model of fatherhood was instrumental in achieving much of the social change of the twentieth century. I am not denying the reality of these fathers’ commitment to this new model, their children, and their emerging sense of self as predicated significantly on being a loving, involved father.

I do argue, however, that an analysis of this new model of fatherhood within the narratives of reproduction and reproductive control in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century reveals that this shift emerged from within the gendered politics of reproductive control. In other words, given that the popular culture depicted, usually negatively, this new father as the result of women’s lack of maternal desire and investment in reproduction, it clearly seems to have been imagined as a way to address

perceived problems in the fall in the reproduction rates of women and the decline of the American family. If society wanted their (reluctant) women to reproduce, then creating a new father who experienced the kind of maternal longing for offspring that had historically been limited to women and who was willing to be an active partner and helpmate in raising children, it would seem, would help mitigate the reasons women could voice for limiting, postponing, or opting out completely from having children.

This shift indicates yet another important cultural shift in the reproductive pressures on women. The failure of the rhetoric of civic duty to control women's reproductive rates resulted in a continual reexamination and revising of the rhetoric surrounding reproduction, motherhood, and ultimately fatherhood. New fatherhood emerged as a cultural ideal designed to focus on the reproductive choices of women as individual, personal, and familial decisions rather than agents of societal change or good. No longer were women encouraged to reproduce for the good of the country. Instead, women were encouraged to reproduce for the good of their husbands and families. The reproductive practices of women, once centered around notions of societal, national, and civic good, had become personal.

The Critical Debate over Fatherhood

In order to understand how the changing rhetoric of fatherhood affected women's reproductive choices, it is important to examine the history of the father's role in the family, and particularly, his role in child rearing. The current historical debate about the nature of fatherhood in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries revolves around disputes over the level of a father's investment in their children and their level of involvement in

childcare. Cultural commentators, such as David Blankenhorn, and family historians such as Mary P. Ryan and Mark Carnes, taking their cue from the separate sphere ideology and the cultural fanfare for motherhood in the nineteenth century, argue that nineteenth-century America witnessed a “de-fathering” of men.⁷⁴ As Mary Ryan puts it, this resulted in a fatherhood that “almost” “wither(ed) away” because of the familial restructuring that allowed the mother/child bond to “assume central place in the constellation of the family” (4). They argue that, as men increasingly went off to work in jobs no longer centered around the home and family sphere and as women increasingly were viewed as spiritually and morally superior, mothers came to be the sole custodians of children, and fathers played distant, patriarchal roles. Men were thought to exhibit little affection for their children or interest in their children’s lives; women were the sole caretakers, educators, and disciplinarians.

Other historians, such as Ralph LaRossa and Steven Franks, have questioned this view of fatherhood in the nineteenth century.⁷⁵ Steven Franks in particular argues that the nineteenth century witnessed, not a de-fathering, but a different fathering, and that letters, diaries, and writings of fathers of the time show fathers playing a sustained and engaged paternal role in the lives of their children. While men did work outside of the home, men as well as women embraced the sentimental notion that the family offered sanctuary and solace from the corrupting demands of the public sphere. As a result, men took their roles as husbands and fathers seriously, and not only was affection a central component of this fathering, but they also developed new ways of interacting with their

⁷⁴ See David Blankenhorn’s polemical *Fatherless America* for an example of a popular cultural commentary on the history of “defathering” in America and Mary Ryan’s *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Families of Oneida County New York 1790-1865* for a historical account.

⁷⁵ See Ralph LaRossa’s *The Modernization of Fatherhood* and Stephen Frank’s *Life with Father* for alternate historical accounts of fatherhood in America.

children, such as father play, and became increasingly concerned about issues such as their child's future standing in society, career options, and potential romantic unions. In short, the nineteenth-century father in Franks' assessment, while perhaps not the "modern" father of the late twentieth century, was an active, affectionate, and worried paternal figure.⁷⁶

Other critics support this view by addressing the emotional investment nineteenth century fathers had in their children. Steven Mintz describes the wartime emotional turmoil fathers experienced during the Civil War in being separated from their children and the doubts and anxieties they expressed in their letters about their losing their children's affection and love because of their absence.⁷⁷ Karen Sanchez-Eppler writes about the effect of infant and child death on fathers and argues that not only did they experience a great deal of grief when their children died but that public displays of grief by fathers were socially acceptable.⁷⁸

Blankenhorn argues of examples such as Mintz and Sanchez-Eppler that while the shift from father to mother as the primary caregiver in the nineteenth century should not be exaggerated and that "despite its steady contraction, nineteenth-century fatherhood was almost certainly stronger than its twentieth-century successor," the overall historical

⁷⁶ These critics, and this chapter, focus on the role of white middle-class fathers in childrearing in the nineteenth-century. Variations by race, class, ethnicity, and region complicate this already complex story of the development of a modern notion of fatherhood. A more complete analysis of the role of the father in family dynamics and childrearing is needed for a complete picture of the historical changes of fatherhood, and in particular, care must be taken to not generalize these trends beyond white, middle-class fathers. However, a complete analysis is beyond the bounds of this chapter's scope, and so this chapter limits claims about fathers and their roles to this demographic group.

⁷⁷ See Mintz's *Huck's Raft* for a discussion of the war's impact on families and children, and particularly, the affects of the soldier fathers' absences on their relationship with their children and place in the family.

⁷⁸ See Sanchez-Eppler's *Dependent States: The Child's Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) for a discussion of the parental experiences of grief in the nineteenth century.

trend of fatherhood remains one of a broad cultural “shrinking” (14). This prevalent view of the history of fatherhood is at odds though with the historians who try to make sense of the increasing rhetoric of fatherhood in the nineteenth and twentieth century that encouraged men to take active roles in the daily care of their children, to be help-mates, play-mates, and role-models.

It seems clear that this prevalent historical narrative of fatherhood’s long decline creates far too neat a linear trajectory for fatherhood. Fatherhood, like motherhood, has always been, and continues to be, a highly fraught, and hotly contested, cultural category. As Stephen Franks argues, “Scholarly fascination with the social and cultural construction of difference between the sexes has obscured the extent to which nineteenth-century Americans thought of parenting as a shared commitment and mutual endeavor” (1). Franks has attributed this to scholars’ “overly literal understanding of the so-called separate spheres” and an inclination to see Victorian society as physically divided into two realms, public and private, with little overlap in duties or activities (2).⁷⁹ However, contrary to this view, he argues that even as society venerated motherhood and economic and labor conditions pushed men out of the home and into the marketplace, social critics, reformers, and advice writers encouraged fathers to be even more actively involved in the daily care and lives of their children.

For Franks, despite the claim that “fatherhood ‘lost its meaning’ in [the] feminized middle-class households” of the separate spheres nineteenth century, fathers remained willing, involved, and active parental partners. What this critical disagreement over the father’s role in the nineteenth century shows is that, rather than being evacuated

⁷⁹ Anna Gavanis also discusses these opposing tendencies in her work *Fatherhood Politics in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004). In particular, see her section, “The Long History of the ‘New Father.’”

of cultural meaning, or “decultured” as Blankenhorn terms it, fatherhood is constantly being reimagined, reshaped, and reevaluated. This chapter traces those conflicts in the cultural construction of fatherhood in the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century in terms of how society reimagined the father’s role in the lives of his children and what implications this reshaping had for narratives of reproductive choice and control.

This reshaping of a new paternal figure was not without cultural anxiety, however. As this new father became more and more the cultural norm in the early twentieth century, the “feminized” father figure became a source of public ridicule and mockery. Henry James’s first novel *Watch and Ward* (1868) features an early literary example of the maternal father and perhaps the earliest literary example of the stay-at-home father. The novel’s plot features a single, middle-age man without marriage prospects who adopts a young girl in order to take up the “vocation” of fatherhood. James holds his protagonist up both as a perhaps unfortunate product of his time and as a source of mirth and figure of fun. *Watch and Ward* reflects both the changing role of fathers of the time and the societal ambivalence, even scorn, directed at these changes. This cultural anxiety over the “new” maternal father indicated how this changing notion of fatherhood was viewed as a threat to masculinity, and in some ways, the mockery directed towards this maternal father figure intensifies in the early twentieth century. As late as the 1940’s, magazine and journals published outraged articles about the “maternal father.”⁸⁰

However, as the new fatherhood begins to more firmly take root in the twentieth century, and despite the fact that it continued to be fiercely debated in the public realm,

⁸⁰ Ralph LaRossa gives an extended discussion and analysis of the emergence of the new “maternal father” in the early twentieth century, as well as the accompanying cultural anxiety surrounding it.

the view of the father as naturally longing for children and participating actively in their general care gained cultural ground. The scenes of Mr. Walton's longing for children from the film *Where Are My Children?* evince the increasing ideological weight that paternal longing had on the public's imagination. An abundance of seminars, books, and articles directed at fathers began to emerge which advocated for fathers taking an active role in the daily care of children from birth.⁸¹

Paternal Longing in the Nineteenth Century

In January 1871, Anthony Comstock married Margaret Hamilton, a woman ten years his senior.⁸² Maggie's father had suffered a financial catastrophe, leaving his daughters to support the family. Described as "worn out" and "never strong," Maggie was a woman from whom the bloom of youth had faded from the burden of hard work and constant financial worry. Comstock nonetheless "found it easy to love this faded, sweet and self-effacing woman whom he had chosen as his bride" (Broun and Leech 157). Indeed, he often referred to her as his "precious little wife" and a "blessed gift." On December 4, 1871 the happy couple was blessed with a daughter. As he wrote in his

⁸¹ In 1933, the Cleveland Child Health Association created perhaps the first prenatal classes for men to accompany its prenatal courses for women, which had been offered since 1922. By the late 1930s and 1940s, several other cities began to follow suit, offering similar courses for men on infant care and childrearing. There was also a rise in child-rearing manuals directed once again at fathers—Vass Martin's *Expectant Fathers* (1930), David Victor's *Father Doing Nicely* (1938), and Hazel Corbin's *Getting Ready to Be a Father* (1939) serve as examples. To further indicate the changes taking place in the public treatment of fatherhood, while Victor and Martin's books are tongue-in-cheek, Corbin's was straight-forward in its treatment of its subject matter. See LaRossa's *Modernization of Fatherhood*.

⁸² See *Anthony Comstock: Roundsman of the Lord* (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1927) by Haywood Broun and Margaret Leech for a brief account of Comstock's personal biography.

diary, “a little daughter born this morning about 8:15 A.M. Weighs 9 Lbs” (Broun and Leech 159).

But their happiness would not last long. The child, Lillie, died soon after birth, and Comstock wrote that night, “The Lord’s will be done. Oh for grace to say it and live it!” Soon after this tragic event, in the course of his official duties as postmaster general, he visited a tenement building in Chinatown where he encountered a newly born infant girl whose mother was dying. Perhaps fearing that Maggie was beyond child-bearing age, Comstock took the infant and brought her home, eventually adopting her through the Brooklyn court system. Adele, as the child was named, was raised as his own daughter, and Comstock was by all accounts a devoted and involved father. In fact, Adele would often accompany her father to work. Adele suffered from developmental delays, but it was only after Comstock’s death that a judge ruled it necessary that she be institutionalized, where she remained for the rest of her life.

This personal anecdote from a well-known historical figure often vilified for his role in suppressing the dissemination of knowledge about birth control and contraceptives opens up a discussion about the nature of fatherhood, paternal longing, and a father’s involvement in the caretaking of children in the nineteenth century, as well as the way the changing rhetoric of fatherhood connected to issues of reproductive control. Anthony Comstock famously used his position as postmaster general as a perch from which to launch an anti-vice crusade aimed at eradicating immoral materials. This crusade resulted in the passing of the Comstock Act of 1873, which made it illegal to disseminate immoral materials through the postal service, including literature on birth control and abortifacients. It is this legacy of preventing women from accessing information about

controlling their own reproductive processes that has garnered him the position as the proverbial boogey-man of reproductive control.⁸³

As a result, Comstock became a historical and political figure that represented men's desire to control women's reproductive options. Scholars such as Janet Brodie, Leigh Ann Wheeler, and Nicole Beisel have constructed narratives of men's engagement in reproductive issues that have generally viewed men as agents controlling women's reproductive possibilities, either as fathers and husbands, or, as with Comstock, through legal and political means.⁸⁴ This anecdote, though, reveals a very different, personal side to the historical figure and helps to complicate the critical view of men's role in reproductive control. Whatever his public views of women, reproduction, and immorality were, personally, his longing for a child is evident from his story. Further, the references in Haywood Broun and Margaret Leech's biography to Comstock's propensity for taking of his daughter to work with him, as well as the mention that after his death, she was institutionalized, while cursory, indicate that Comstock, and not his wife, most probably functioned as Maggie's primary caretaker.

⁸³ This historical view of him is further heightened by the contemporary reactions to his crusade. His anti-vice crusades of the 1870s and 1880s often butted heads with growing women's rights movements that were conversely calling for greater and greater access to these very same products he deemed immoral. As Nicola Beisel points out, the efforts to criminalize methods of reproductive control such as abortion and contraception were led largely by men, and groups such the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice did not admit women to its meetings until 1891, a full two decades after the group was created. Indeed, as Beisel asserts, the anti-vice societies and the campaign against obscenity was the "province of men"(71). Although the call for the suppression of obscenity was framed in terms of concern over safeguarding children's sexual purity, Comstock and his allies largely targeted material aimed almost exclusively at women.⁸³ They relied on the language of paternalism as their justification for shielding both women and children from these obscene materials. See Beisel's *Imperiled Innocents: Anthony Comstock and Family Reproduction in Victorian America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

⁸⁴ See Janet Brodie's work *Abortion and Contraceptives* for a history of birth control in this country, see Leigh Ann Wheeler's work *Against Obscenity: Reform and the Politics of Womanhood in America, 1873-1935* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004) for a history of the anti-vice movement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in this country, and see Nicola Beisel's *Imperiled Innocents* for a history of Comstock's law and the role of children in the anti-crusade.

Comstock's personal narrative of deep fatherly longing and the active role he took in his daughter's caretaking speaks to the changing role of fathers in the lives of their children in the nineteenth century, one that is largely at odds with Blankenhorn's view that the nineteenth century witnessed a dramatic reversal in men and women's parental roles. According to Blankenhorn, prior to the nineteenth century, men were seen as the primary parents, while women held an auxiliary role. For Blankenhorn, the historical trajectory for American fatherhood has been a clear and linear downward slope: "Today's fragmentation of fatherhood represents the end point of a long historical process: the steady diminishment of fatherhood as a social role for men" (12).

Several critics and historians support this view of the role of fathers in the colonial era, arguing that while colonial fathers generally were not the primary caretakers of infants, beyond infancy, fathers were seen as the "child socializers," which in colonial terms meant being responsible for the education, moral instruction, and discipline of children, and as the "ultimate authority in family matters" (Frank 24 and Carnes 108). Legal, institutional, and cultural forces reinforced this view of fathers as the primary parent; courts routinely awarded custody to fathers in divorce cases, advice manuals on child-rearing were written for and addressed to fathers, and children who were serving as apprentices often wrote letters to home addressed to their fathers, not their mothers (Blankenhorn 13-14, Franks 24, and Demos 429).⁸⁵ Historians Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg argue that this view of childhood and child-rearing emerged out of a Lockian view of the child as "tabula rasa," or blank slate. As a result, "novelists and child-rearing experts told their readers that the primary object of child rearing was not to instill

⁸⁵ See Demos' essay "The Changing Faces of Fatherhood: A New Exploration of American Family History" in *Father and Child: Development and Clinical Perspectives* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1982).

submission to authority but to develop a child's conscience and self-government" (Mintz and Kellogg 47). Michael Grossberg argues,

Traditionally in Anglo-American law fathers had an almost unlimited right to the custody of their minor, legitimate children. The law assumed that the interests of children were best protected by making the father the natural guardian and by using a property-based standard of parental fitness. Custody law considered children to be dependent, subordinate beings. Their services, earnings, and so on became the property of their paternal masters in exchange for life and maintenance. This *quid pro quo* developed directly out of the settled conviction that fathers were best equipped to care for their offspring. (Grossberg 238)

Mark Carnes points out that fathers were legally seen as so essential to the family that upon his death, "the family as a legal entity was dissolved" (108).

Beginning in the 1800s, though, in many ways these positions reversed. Critics such as Blankenhorn, Ryan, Demos, and Carnes attribute this shift to industrialization and the development of a modern economy and labor system, which led to the "physical separation of men from the home," essentially removing fathers from the daily life of their families and the related feminization of the domestic sphere (Carnes 110).⁸⁶ Carnes attributes this change as resulting from the growing demographic trends of the rising prices of real estate and business congestion in city and town centers that led to the "displacement of middle-class residential housing" (110). Carnes goes on to attribute the "outpouring of advice books on family government and child rearing" to a "response to the withdrawal of men from the domestic sphere" (110). In his view, works such as Theodore Dwight's *The Father's Book* (1834) decried what they saw as the diminishing of the father's role in the family and aimed to reverse the trend towards the primacy of

⁸⁶ Blankenhorn's *Fatherless America*, Carnes' *Secret Ritual*, Ryan's *Cradle of the Middle Class*, and John Demos' essay "The Changing Faces of Fatherhood" serve as representative examples of this narrative of fatherly decline in America.

the mother as caretaker by persuading men to reassume their responsibilities within the home. As Rev. John S. C. Abbott lamented in 1842, “Paternal neglect at the present time is one of the most abundant sources of domestic sorrow,” as “the father ... eager in the pursuit of business, toils early and late, and finds no time to fulfill...duties to his children” (qtd. in Carnes 111). John Demos describes this trend as one toward “limited fatherhood” (438). The development of the special legal status of the “tender years,” the belief in the special capacity of women to nurture and provide moral and spiritual guidance especially for young children, and the decline in the patriarchal model of marriage and movement towards a companionate ideal of marriage all contributed to this “contraction” of the role of father. This critical narrative of the “contraction” of fatherhood, then, shares certain key beliefs: that the nineteenth century serves as the turning point for fatherhood in America; that this change occurred because of industrialization and the shift from a producer-driven economy to a consumer-driven one; and that this change was universal and uncontested. In other words, the dominant critical belief is that fathers in the nineteenth became “unfathered.” However, what this critical narrative fails to imagine is that the nineteenth century witnessed, not the de-fathering of America, but a change in the role of the father. Exploring the letters, diaries, and writings of men in the nineteenth century about their role as fathers reveals how our notion of the “modern” father, thought to have emerged at the earliest in the latter part of the first half of the twentieth century, was actually culturally visible in the nineteenth century.

The “Modern” Father in the Nineteenth Century

In 1854, the New York State Legislature declared, “There is no human love so generous, strong, and steadfast as that of the mother for her child.” This statement is significant more for its ubiquity than for its uniqueness. Motherhood in the nineteenth century came to be more culturally revered than it perhaps had ever been before. As Steven Frank puts it, “In important ways, fathers and fatherhood have become a lost chord in the antebellum fanfare for mothers and the power of mothers’ love” (23). It is partly this reverence of motherhood that helped lead to the erosion of paternal custody rights in the nineteenth century and the emergence of a judicial patriarchy. As has been widely documented by historians, such as Steven Mintz and Michael Grossberg, the nineteenth century witnessed an institutionalization of the primacy of the mother’s role in a child’s life, particularly through the changes in custody laws. As Carnes puts it, as “women acquired new status as moral guardians of the young ... courts increasingly acknowledged the supremacy of mothers in child rearing” (111). According to family law historians, the courts became so invested in the idea that women were the best and natural caregivers for children that the legal notion of the “tender years” doctrine, the idea that infants and children in their “tender years” were almost universally better off with their mothers than their fathers, developed. Mintz attributes this shift partly to the traumatic effect of the war on the nation’s psyche, which led to a greater investment in the notion of a prolonged and protected childhood and the emergence of “child protection.”

However, as historians Peter Bardaglio and Michael Grossberg have argued, the emergence of a “judicial patriarchy,” intended to provide children with legal protection,

only further eroded men's custodial rights.⁸⁷ Throughout the early nineteenth century, three legal premises greatly increased the court's role in determining custody: the tender years doctrine; the "best interest of the child" premise, which held that child welfare should be the chief concern of the courts in determining custody disputes; and the *parens patriae*, which gave courts the authority to override parent's custody rights. The use of the Latin phrase *parens patriae*, meaning "parent to the country," has telling implications for understanding what is at stake for the father's role in the family in understanding this shift to a greater role of the court in child protection and custody. Prior to this foundational change in the understanding of parental custody, custody law relied on English common law, which viewed offspring as part of the estate "owned" by the family patriarch, creating a legal view of a father's rights to his offspring as economic concerns. With the shift to the *parens patriae* model of child protection, the court usurped the father's position as the patriarch of the custodial family. As Grossberg argues, "Influenced by the society's growing glorification of motherhood and female domesticity, judges granted women new legal powers in family affairs," but as women increasingly and successfully used domestic ideology to argue for custody rights, parental custody became "untenable," and consequently, rather than simply transfer custodial rights to women, which would in effect creating a matriarchal custodial system to replace the patriarchal one, the courts instead usurped this role for itself, transferring the "power from the male parent to the male jurist, making judges a new kind of patriarch" (241). This new role of the courts, however, met resistance in legal and political arenas by those

⁸⁷ Peter Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household: Family, Sex, and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); and Michael Grossberg, *Governing the Hearth: Law and the Family in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

outraged by the loss of the father's absolute position in the family. As one lawyer claimed in an 1840's custody battle, this shift represented "nothing less than an assumption of power by a court...to determine the domestic arrangement of a man's family" (qtd. in Grossberg 242). These changes, which began in the antebellum period, dominated custody disputes of the 1860's and 1870's, and such disputes were the center of the debate over the court's appropriate role in the family and fathers' relationship to child-rearing and care-taking. As Grossberg asserts, by the 1860's, "parental fitness and not parental rights would be the focus of custody disputes," and it was clear "that judges would assume the mantle of patriarchs" (242). The shift from parental rights to parental fitness meant that a father's right to his children was not absolute, a real blow to men's position as patriarchal head of the family.

In one particularly bitter 1840 Pennsylvania custody case, the court's decision relied primarily on the notion that a father's care was at best a "substitute" for a mother's true maternal ability, which it describes with almost spiritual reverence: "Not doubting that parental anxiety would seek for and obtain the best substitute which could be procured, every instinct of humanity unerringly proclaims that no substitute can supply the place of her, whose watchfulness over the sleeping cradle or waking moments of her offspring is prompted by deeper and holier feelings that the most liberal allowance of a nurse's wages could possibly stimulate."⁸⁸ The mother's lawyer in the case summed up

⁸⁸ This case involved a custody dispute between the daughter of a wealthy Bostonian and a Swiss nobleman. The bitter custody case sprung from disagreements about where to live—Switzerland versus Boston—and the mother in the case feared that her husband would remove her son, an American citizen born in Boston, to Switzerland. She searched the East coast for a court sympathetic to maternal custody and found it in Philadelphia. Although the husband argued that in the absence of specific proof of his unfitness as a father he should be given custody, the judge sided with the mother, claiming that even in the absence of the father's "slightest mental, moral, or physical disqualification from superintending the general welfare of the infant," the interest of the child was best served by remaining in the care of the mother. As the court stated it, "Not doubting that paternal anxiety would seek for and obtain the best

the court's position by saying, "Everyone knows that a father is unfit to take care of an infant; physically unfit and unfit by reason of his avocations" (qtd. in Grossberg 242).

However, at the turn of the twentieth century, sociologist L. T. Hobhouse writes that while "very few men have any natural aptitude with babies," "it is almost a physical difficulty to refrain from picking up a small child who holds out its arms to one, and when he has caught it up, a man is inclined to sway with it and handle it, as women used to do before they had theories."⁸⁹ This view of the physical desire that men have to care for infants that is every bit as "natural" as that of women calls into question the notion that men had unambiguous and uncontested feelings about society's rejection of their willingness and ability to care for their children. Clearly, everyone did not know that a father is unfit to take care of an infant.

These two anecdotes, one from a personal reflection on paternal feelings and one from a public court case, expose the growing conflict between the personal feelings of the paternal and the public face of paternity. Hobhouse's naturalizing of parental feeling and the yearning he evinces runs counter to the legal and societal ideas of paternity. Even the lawyer's reference to men's physical inability to care for infants conflicts with Hobhouse's assertion of the "physical difficulty" men experienced in refraining from meeting infants' needs. Even further, the lawyer's denial of men's fitness to care for

substitute which could be procured, every instinct of humanity unerringly proclaims that no substitute can supply the place of her, whose watchfulness over the sleeping cradle or waking moments of her offspring is prompted by deeper and holier feelings than the most liberal allowance of a nurse's wage could stimulate." As cited in Grossberg.

⁸⁹ As cited in Susan Mizruchi, *The Science of Sacrifice: American Literature and Modern Social Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 236.

infants in terms of their “avocation” completely precludes the idea of fatherhood as a calling, much as motherhood was understood to be.

In a particularly revealing statement, legal historian Lawrence Friedman asserts, “Courts gave more and more recognition to the mother—the actual caregiver. Mothers were going to raise the children anyway; there were few fathers who could and would do so. It is not surprising, then, that the cases referred more and more frequently to mother love—how important it was, how precious; and that the doctrines of custody shifted in the direction of the mother. Children needed mothers more than they needed fathers” (*Private Lives* 131). Friedman goes on to assert that, even in cases where fathers did get custody, “nobody really expected fathers to take care of small children—to feed the babies or wipe their noses” because “men who were awarded custody of children had servants, or at the very least women relatives—a mother, a sister, or perhaps a new wife—to take over the job of actually raising the children” (131).

Friedman’s comments mix historical fact (the increasing prevalence of mother’s receiving custody) with historical suppositions (that no one expected fathers to actually take care of small children or that few fathers could or would raise their children). In doing so, he shows how these assumptions about nineteenth century father’s aptitude and desire to care for children are part of a larger historical narrative that men, prior to the emergence of “modern” fatherhood in the late twentieth century, had little interest in the care-taking of children for its own sake and little ambivalence about their lack of roles in their children’s life.

However, as examples like Hobhouse’s show, an examination of the historical and cultural evidence suggests that even as the rhetoric of fatherhood more consistently

focused on the father's "natural" inability to take care of their children, nineteenth century fathers were in fact invested and involved in their children's care. Indeed, even fathers who survived the war felt the effects of their time away from their family as a loss of their standing and place in the family. Steven Mintz, in his historical account of American childhood, details wartime fathers' attempts to stay connected to their families and their pleas to their wives to ensure that their children would not forget them during their long absence. Mintz notes one such example in the appeals of James Garfield, the future president, to his wife to remind his daughter of her "papa, papa" so that when he came back from the war, "she may know to call me" (129). Garfield's desire for his daughter to remember him as "papa" evokes the depth of the returning fathers' fears over their loss of place in the family—even their very linguistic signifier of "father" was subject to loss. Further, the mere fact that their families were able to function without them serving in their role as fathers, and their wives' ability to raise the children and manage the family in their absence, made the very nature of their role as father suspect. Hamlin Garland recalled his father returning from the war as "only a strange man with big eyes and [a] care-worn face" (qtd. in Mintz 132). As Mintz asserts, the Civil War "altered—and diminished—the father's role in the family" (132). While historical incidences of fathers' absences from their children certainly could be seen as contributing to the "diminishing" of the father's role and contributing to the rhetoric of "defathering," equally as significant is the desire and longing to be remembered and valued that the fathers expressed in their letters.

What Hobhouse's assertion also makes explicit is the connection between this new fatherhood and concerns over women's (un)willingness to take up their proper roles

as mothers. Hobhouse's claim that women "used to" be "inclined to sway with [and] dandle" infants "before they had theories" references the cultural fear that changes in women's rights and status in society had resulted in their abandoning of their maternal duties and even in their resistance to their sacred duty of procreating. For Hobhouse, the emergence of men's paternal instincts has directly resulted from women's abandoning of their own maternal ones.

Like Comstock's willingness to adopt an infant most likely out of fears over his frail wife's reproductive capabilities and *Where Are My Children's* Mr. Walton's evident longing for children while his wife blithely aborts their unborn fetuses, these anecdotal accounts of men embracing fatherhood in the face of women's perceived abandoning of their reproductive duties indicates how paternal longing and the shifts in the rhetoric surrounding fatherhood function as a form of reproductive control. After all, if men so desire children that it is "almost a physical difficulty to refrain," and if they are so desperate to be fathers that they spend their time gazing longingly at the neighbor children, and if they are willing to go so far as to adopt, and care for, infants themselves in order to be fathers, who are women to deny them the children they so desire? Paternal longing, then, served to highlight men's stake in the reproduction of women. After all, if women failed to reproduce, men failed to be fathers.

The "New" Father

Henry James's first novel *Watch and Ward*, published in 1868, provides an early fictive example of paternal longing, as well as the "maternal father." The novel, which centers around the main character's desire for marriage and children, has received little

critical attention, largely because of its perceived immature and awkward style, particularly in comparison to James's later, more mature works.⁹⁰ Nonetheless, *Watch and Ward* provides a particularly clear literary example of the sort of "new" father significant for understanding fatherhood in the nineteenth century, one which depicts in fictional terms the same paternal longing and changing rhetoric of the father's role at work in the larger culture.

Roger, we learn from the opening of the novel, desires nothing more than to be married and have children. The novel opens by asserting that "From an early age his curiosity had chiefly taken the form of a timid but strenuous desire to fathom the depths of matrimony. He had dreamed of this gentle bondage as other men dream of the 'free unhooded condition' of celibacy. He had been born a marrying man, with a conscious desire for progeny" (8). What is telling about this quote is that his desire for marriage stems from his desire for progeny. While this theme of men's desire for heirs is certainly not new, what is new is that in Roger's case, "the world in this respect had not done him justice" (8). Despite the fact that he was "serving a devout apprenticeship to the profession of husband and father" (8), a phrasing that mirrors the dismissive claim that men do not possess the "avocation" of fatherhood, he had been unable to find a woman to help him accomplish his goals. Indeed, Roger's desire to enter into that profession is so

⁹⁰ Henry James's novel *Watch and Ward* is generally seen by readers and critics alike as such a "strange first novel," so riddled by "technical deficiencies" that it warrants little serious critical attention. The few critics who have discussed it often do so dismissively, as Robert Emmet Long does, calling it a "very slight work," a "curiosity of James's apprenticeship," *James: The Early Novels* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 10. Muriel Shine writes, "the novel is most noted for its certain quality of the writing, which is embarrassingly naïve in its projection of certain erotic elements," *The Fictional Children of Henry James* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 127. Although she acknowledges that when given more serious scholarly attention the novel is most often noted for its introduction of themes and characters that would recur throughout James's body of work, Shine too dismisses the novel: "The novel itself, unfortunately, has little relevance beyond the historical; its old-fashioned charm hardly compensates for technical deficiencies," of which she lists the unconvincing nature of Nora's character (128). Even "serious" treatments of the novel tend to simultaneously dismiss it.

great that the sight of his heart's desire, Miss Morton, causes him to imagine, "There glimmered mistily in the young man's brain a vision of a home-scene in the future—a lamp-lit parlour on a winter night, a placid wife and mother wreathed in household smiles, a golden-haired child, and, in the midst, his sentient self, drunk with possession and gratitude" (10). Here, the "golden-haired" child is desired along with the "placid wife and mother," which readers might interpret as a fairly traditional male desire for the family life that nineteenth century commentators convinced them was needed to combat the wearisome and degrading influences of public life. Both Roger and his intended, Miss Morton, fail to adhere to the seemingly "natural" nineteenth century gender norms. Miss Morton, we learn, is a heart-breaker, a woman who was "supposed to wear some dozen broken hearts on her girdle, as an Indian wears the scalps of his enemies" (8) and has no intention of marrying Roger. The violent imagery of this analogy underscores the unnaturalness of her character. As the narrator observes, "there was . . . so marked a want of the natural" about her while Roger "was the most unobtrusively natural of men." James, in essence, reverses the traditional nineteenth century gender roles: Roger is the good, virtuous man who desperately desires children, while Miss Morton is the playgirl, completely uninterested in settling down. Of course, in asserting that Roger is "the most unobtrusively natural of men," when all we really know about him is that he desires marriage and children, the narrator naturalizes the desire for marriage and children for men. Miss Morton, meanwhile, echoes cultural fears about "modern" women since she is unnatural in her desire not to marry, and presumably not to have children. Like the selfish social butterflies of Weber's film, she has abandoned her proper role as wife and mother

in order to pursue her own selfish desires. It is not hard to imagine her visiting her own Dr. Malfit if she found herself in the family way.

While this plot of failed romance is perhaps not unusual within the James canon, it is unusual that this failed romance begins, rather than ends, the novel. In a plot move not unlike the modern adoption or surrogacy story of the single, working woman who doesn't need a man in order to start her family, and like the real-life example of Comstock, Roger adopts a child when he is unable to start his family through the traditional means of marriage. When he meets Nora, he feels "in his heart the tumult of a new emotion. Was it the inexpugnable instinct of paternity? Was it the restless ghost of his buried hope?" (16) If Roger can't have a "placid wife," he can at least have a "golden-haired" child.

Roger's relationship to Nora in the novel also calls into question assumptions about the level of men's involvement in the caretaking of their children.⁹¹ Roger, contrary to the assertion that men have little to no interest or aptitude in childcare, becomes deeply involved in Nora's upbringing and daily care. Giving us what is perhaps the first literary example of a stay-at-home dad, James writes that Roger "withdrew altogether from his profession, and prepared to occupy his house in the country. The latter was immediately transformed into a home for Nora—a home admirably fitted to become the starting point

⁹¹ While much has been written on the role of children in James's work, little critical attention has been paid to the depictions of father/child relationships. The subject of children and the related theme of parent/child relations abound in many of James's novels, from *Daisy Miller* to *What Maisie Knew* to *The Awkward Age*. Shine argues that, for James, these children are "vessels of consciousness" allowing James to work out ideas of personhood and privacy. Maeve Pearson has recently argued that James uses children in his works to expose problems inherent in the sentimental investment in the Romantic child and cast doubt on this child's inability to carry the burden of social regeneration. Pearson's argument, like Mizruchi's, focuses on the transmission from one generation to the next with children as the vehicle of these cultural transmissions, and in doing so, they represent a thread of Jamesian criticism that focuses on children's meaning in his novels by understanding what children represent. See Pearson's "Re-exposing the Jamesian Child: The Paradox of Children's Privacy," *The Henry James Review* 28.2 (2007), 101-119.

of a happy life” (20-21). The idea of a man withdrawing from the public sphere and creating an idyllic private home life for his daughter indicates the extent to which James is both inverting the conventional gender dichotomies of his day and referencing the growing calls of advice writers and cultural commentators that fathers embrace their roles as fathers and devote themselves to their children’s upbringing. Roger takes this advice to its most extreme end. Even further, Roger involves himself in every aspect of raising Nora and, echoing Mintz and Kellogg’s assertion of children as viewed as a “*tabula rasa*,” wants “to drive in the first nail with his own hands, to lay the smooth foundation stones of Nora’s culture, to teach her to read and write and cipher, to associate himself largely with the growth of her primal sense of things.” He worries, one could even say obsesses, about her education, whether she is getting too much exercise or too little, her diet, even her sleeping habits. Roger’s caretaking of Nora does not seem to differ in quality or quantity from what a nineteenth century mother would be expected to perform. Indeed, one character acerbically asserts that Roger “ought never to marry; his wife would die for want of occupation” (121).

If this new father is one who is supposed to be the playmate, the confidant, the worried father concerned with not just with the moral and spiritual growth of his offspring, but also the health, happiness, and well-being, then Roger is the new father taken to the extreme. In fact, if as Franks argues, one of the primary duties of the new father is to help his children find suitable mates, then Roger also takes this role to the extreme by determining his daughter’s future suitor far in advance by appointing himself as her intended. When he writes of his plan to Miss Morton, now Mrs. Keith, early in the novel, he makes this clear: “I promised you once to be very unhappy ... You know that,

two years ago, I adopted a homeless little girl. One of these days she will be a lovely woman. I mean to do what I can to make her one. Perhaps, six years hence, she will be grateful enough not to refuse me as you did. Pray for me more than ever. I have begun at the beginning; it will be my own fault if I have not a perfect wife” (34). He is, as another character in the novel terms it, “fashioning of a wife to order” (61).⁹²

This, of course, gets at a central issue in understanding James’s depiction of this new father. Roger both reflects, and parodies, these perceived changes in the role of the father, and in doing so, Roger foreshadows the early twentieth century concern with the “maternal father.” After all, Roger is a weak, effeminate character, eaten alive by women, overly fastidious, and willing to give up the stimulating, masculine world of the public sphere to devote himself to the private world of home and family. Even in a

⁹² The incestuous nature of this plotline is perhaps the most commented upon element in the novel. In an anonymous review of the *Watch and Ward* published in the *New York Times* in 1878, the reviewer writes of the novel, “The perilous experiment of a man taking a child and bringing her up to be his wife is admirably depicted. That keen analysis Mr. James possesses permits him to show how in Roger the feeling of paternity and the affection of the lover may go on together.” Robert Emmet Long makes a similar argument about Roger’s relationship to Nora: “The idea of the artist is seen in his adoption and guidance of Nora toward his ideal. He ‘creates’ Nora from shabby circumstances and unpromising materials, and fashions her into his conception. The myth of Pygmalion, who falls in love with and weds his own conception, is implied throughout *Watch and Ward*, and this analogy also makes Roger a ‘sculptor’ of a kind” (21). Alfred Habegger reads the novel in terms of James’s harsh review of Louisa May Alcott’s novel *Moods* and James’s engagement with the incestuous guardian-ward plot so central to the sentimental fiction of the antebellum era. He argues, “What James did in this ungainly and immature work was to adopt the guardian-ward love story and transform the pleasing father-daughter incest fantasy intended for women readers into a nice-guys-finish-first daydream for good old boys” (74). And while his attempt to historicize the narrative of *Watch and Ward* is a necessary and desirable one in terms of drawing out the text’s significance, he seems to largely miss the mark by simplifying the novel and taking Roger’s motives at face value. Habegger’s assertions that “what James devised in the novel was an exceptionally adroit solution to the old problem given so much attention in the women’s novels he had been reading and reviewing: How does one work out a pleasing incest fantasy without violating decorum?” and that “the key to James’s solution was the transfer of power and mastery from the paternal lover to the unworthy rivals, a solution designed to render guardian and ward equals and thus to purify their love of all sadomasochistic elements” seems to grossly misread the novel (81). While ultimately Habegger does acknowledge that the novel “masks dependency as love” and that while “James tried hard to eliminate the coercive pressure of the intolerable middle-aged lover,” the fact is, however, “when all was said and done the coercion was still there” (81). The coercion is so apparent, however, that it seems to invalidate the rest of Habegger’s argument and makes the reader question why he attempts to recover the novel on these grounds in the first place. See Habegger’s *Henry James and the “Woman Business”*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

society that “cares for in a man” “not his household virtues, but his worldly ones,” Roger is content to hone his parenting and household skills (121). Layering the traditional incest narrative of the sentimental novel over one of paternal longing and maternal fatherhood allows James to further mock these “maternal” fathers and calls into question not only their masculinity but also their motives.⁹³ James seems interested in exploring this new father figure, but at the same time, he makes this figure a source of amusement and even ridicule.

Clearly, then, James is not presenting Roger as the “norm” of masculine fatherhood. However, his Roger is not *abnormal* either. As Stephen Frank argues,

What one historian has labeled a “masculine domestic dream” filled the pages of popular fiction written between 1820 and 1860 by both male and female authors. Significantly, themes that emphasized the importance of marriage as a source of joy and fulfillment for men were featured not only in fiction written for a female audience but also in novels written by men and intended for a male readership. Such “men’s authors” as the adventure writer William Gilmore Simms created narratives that incorporated the belief that “a man without a loving woman and comfortable home was incomplete.” (27)

Franks goes on to assert that advice manuals such as H. Clay Trumbull’s 1891 tract *Hints on Child Training* showed “the ideal husband...was a practicing Christian, had no immoral habits, and (reflecting the belief that the body was a temple) was in excellent health. Such a man valued home life and carried out his paternal duties, although these were not often specified” (287-28).

Roger meets and exceeds all of these qualifications. James is clearly poking fun at this model of a husband (as evidenced by Roger’s lack of success finding a wife in a traditional way) and a lot of that fun is had not only at Roger’s expense, but at the

⁹³ Many critics have explored the common plot element of the incest narrative in sentimental novels. See Cindy Weinstein’s *Family, Kinship, and Sympathy* for a particularly compelling discussion of the sociocultural dynamics of this narrative element.

expense of Miss Morton and her “man-eater” ways. But, despite the mocking attitude James displays toward this type of husband and father, there seems to be some narrative sympathy for Roger in the novel. As several critics of the novel have pointed out, the novel reads very much as a nice-guys-finish-first fantasy fulfillment. Nonetheless, the presence of this alternate narrative of fatherhood as early as 1868 further complicates the long-held critical assumptions of the level of engagement that fathers exhibited in their children’s upbringing, as well as the notion that they were not conflicted about their changing role in their children’s life. Roger’s longing to be a father is not anomalous. It is only our belief that men in the nineteenth century did not experience such feelings that prevents us from imagining that women did not have a monopoly on parental longing.

Further, the novel offers yet another cultural example of the connection between paternal longing and reproductive control. Roger, surrounded by women like Miss Morton, who selfishly abandon their procreative duties to pursue their own selfish desires and who refuse to give him the children for which he so longs, takes matters into his own hands by adopting a child and raising her to be a wife-made-to-order, one who presumably won’t shirk her reproductive duties. The novel reveals how the rhetoric of paternal longing and the new father of the late nineteenth century offers a new solution to the perceived problem of the lack of reproduction of middle and upper-class women. The message seems to be that if “modern” women like Miss Morton and Mrs. Walton have failed to do their procreative duty, perhaps future generations of women will be swayed by the notion of fathers who actively long for, and willingly take care of, their children.

The “Maternal” Father

Ultimately, then, the shift in the early twentieth to an embracing of the “maternal” father and the emergence of the current notion of fathers as equal, involved partners in all aspects of the caretaking of infants and children indicates how prevalent rhetoric of paternal longing and new fatherhood had become. What for the late nineteenth century was a source of ridicule—James’ Roger—became in the early twentieth century a warmer, tongue-in-cheek joke and then, ultimately, an established cultural norm. By the late 1930’s, as Ralph LaRossa argues, The New York City Maternity Center Association “spawned what may have been the first non-humorous manual for prospective fathers, Hazel Corbin’s *Getting Ready to Be a Father*” (85). Previous advice manuals directed at fathers had a more “tongue in cheek” tone. As LaRossa asserts, “What [even] in the 1920s was considered a joke, in the 1930s was considered serious business” (85).

As with any new cultural idea, this shift toward taking the maternal father seriously was not uncontested. The medical magazine *Hygeia*, published one man’s tirade against the “maternal father” in which the author offers this scathing description of this new figure and exposes the cultural conflicts at work:

The maternal father arrives home promptly after work. If he commutes he has his hat on and sprinting for the train... On arriving home, he speedily sheds his hat and coat, scrubs his hands with approved child study technique, then, clucking gently, lifts the baby from the basket and takes over the cares of the mother until bedtime for the small creature approaches, and it is tenderly laid away for the night. He bathes and diapers, and holds the bottle. With his mouth full of pins he coos in ecstasy and calls on the world to marvel the baby’s growth. In the meantime the adoring mother sinks into a comfortable chair to relax, or tiptoes out of the room—leaving father and child together in gurgling bliss. (87)

The mocking tone of the writer makes clear the perceived problem with this picture: the reversed gender roles (the womanly “ecstasy and gurgling bliss” the father experiences, which is not unlike the “feminine” Roger, contrasted with the leisure time of the mother, relaxing in a comfortable chair and careful not to disturb father and child) means that the father is emasculated while the mother is empowered. As LaRossa argues, “The gender politics surrounding infant care could not be clearer. A social movement that started out small had become, in the minds of some, dangerous. If perceived threat is one measure of success, then by 1942 New Fatherhood had become a force to be reckoned with” (88). In the same letter, the letter writer expresses fears about how this new phenomenon of a more involved, care-taking father affects women’s expectations of all fathers “by planting in the minds of otherwise contented wives and mothers the feeling that their Tom or Bill or Hugh was not properly interested in and attentive to the new, squirming baby in the basket” (86). Indicating his true concern about this new “menace” to men’s proper role as fathers, he goes on to assert, “We have no quarrel with the maternal father, or for that matter the women who refuses to accept maternity . . . but we protest that neither should he be glorified as representing a standard by which others should be judged” (87). Tellingly, the letter writer places the new maternal father and the “women who refuses to accept maternity” in the same category, indicating the extent to which the emergence of the former speaks to the perception of the latter.

The cultural motivations for this shift toward a new fatherhood can be seen in the *Parents Magazine* series devoted to new fathers. To take another look at an extended portion of the “Confessions of a Newborn Father” column, we see the extent to which even as early as 1930s, fatherhood begins look recognizable to modern readers:

I'll never forget the first time I held my youngster. I had gooseflesh all over and chills down my back ... Well I admit there's nothing alluring about crawling out of bed at 2 a.m. in mid-winter, getting the bottle out of the refrigerator, heating it up, picking up a twelve-pound, warm, wet bundle, unraveling it, redressing your future heir in a dry one, getting a nipple that has the right size hole in it, and finally sitting for fifteen minutes ... Watch him go after that nipple. Watch him go to sleep and keep right on working his suction pump. Listen to him 'grunt' (I know no better word for it) for his highball *de lait*, urging you to hustle along as your clumsy hands adjust the nipple. Hear his sigh of satisfaction when that first spurt of warm milk trickles down his palate... Yes—the first year of baby's life is the hardest for Mother and Father and Baby, but it can be one of the happiest if *you* get into the game.

This column could have been written in 2012 rather than 1932. The level of the father's involvement—and investment—in newborn's care is clear: the admission to “crawling out of bed at 2 am,” the knowledgeable preparation of the bottle, the intimate relationship between the father and infant. As the letter indicates, he is an active, equal, and involved caretaker of his infant, and this level of intimate care clearly gives the father a great deal of personal satisfaction. This father seems like he could have been Mr. Walton, had his wife not made the reproductive choices she did.

The motivation for this advice for new fathers to be heavily involved in the daily work of infant care seems to connect to the ending assertion that while the first year of infancy is a work-intensive, difficult time, it will be “happiest” if the father is an active participant, one who “gets into the game.” And while any mention of the mother is missing from this account, the clear implication is that the mother is also “happiest” when the father takes an active role in childcare. Clearly, then, reasons that might have previously motivated women to limit or forgo having children altogether, reasons like the burdens of their maternal duties, the lack of paternal involvement or help with childcare, or the lack of the father's investment in their children's emotional well-being, are

mitigated by a new ideal of fatherhood. These fathers actively long for parenthood, with all its joys and burdens.

A closer analysis of the rhetoric of new fatherhood indicates the extent to which new conceptions of fatherhood were tied to concerns about women's changing roles in the family, reproductive choices, and the perceived inadequate desire of women to be mothers. *Parents Magazine*, a broad market, popular magazine devoted to all manners of concern for parents, ran a parenting column from 1932 to 1937 aimed at fathers. Called "For Fathers Only," the column clearly attempts to tap into a growing market of invested and involved fathers and explored the growing role of fathers in the daily lives of their children.⁹⁴ As the editor of the magazine stated, "So many fathers read this magazine that we believe they deserve a special department edited by a father." There are several important implications here: first, that fathers were perceived as significant readers of the magazine, both in terms of numbers of readers and in terms of their value as fathers; second, that these fathers need to be addressed by a fellow "father" writer; and third, that the information and ideas aimed at fathers needed to be separated from the general material of the issue, clearly geared toward mothers, into a "special department."

"Confessions of Newborn Father," as the first column in the series, functions rhetorically to describe, and prescribe, the role of this new, modern father. Written by a new father named Charles Pelham, it begins, "The confession is for fathers only. It is addressed to that gentleman who, coattails flying, waves to you and your adorable one as

⁹⁴ Despite the fact that the column was clearly an attempt to capitalize on a perceived emerging market, the column does not seem have been successful in doing so. This is evidenced by the fact that the column is highlighted in its early appearances in the magazine, appearing as the first column of the issue, and in each issue throughout the year, but as the series went on, it clearly waned in popularity, or perhaps never took off, as the column appeared less frequently and when it did appear, it did not appear as one of the first articles.

he runs to catch the 7:45 train or street car to town. This is the man who said he wanted children, loved children, knew a baby would mean a lot to you both-and yet, has seemed only vaguely interested in ‘the cutest, most wonderful cherub on earth’-your baby.” The prescriptive nature of the column is clear. The writer is addressing the father who “said he wanted children” but does not engage in the daily life of his offspring. He is encouraging fathers to take an active, day-to-day role in the lives of their children. His focus in the column on the fact that he’ll “never forget the first time I held my youngster” and on holding “ten pounds of warm pink flesh” indicates the physical, visceral nature of his role as father.

He further gives fathers a “pep talk” about the fact that fatherhood has a learning curve. Arguing “the first year is the hardest for a father, that he feels like a fish out of water with a diaper in one hand which he is expected to attach expertly to the ten pounds of warm pink flesh in the other,” he goes on to claim that “what is quite as important is that you can't fully appreciate or love your baby until you begin to do something *personal* for him.” The use of the term “personal” seems to indicate his essential appeal to fathers—that they make fatherhood personal. He argues that this is “maybe that's why mothers really enjoy young babies so much more than fathers do. They make *personal sacrifices* for them, while most of our contributions are abstract and impersonal-paying the bills, for instance.” In other words, he argues that fathers need to develop personal relationships to their children by making the type of “personal sacrifices” that women make. This idea of making child care “personal” ties in with the overall argument that this “new fatherhood” makes about reproduction. Rather than viewing reproduction as a public good, something one does to ensure the continuation of their lines and the future of

society, parenthood, and particularly fatherhood, are being posited as a personal good, founded on personal relationships between fathers and their children, and personally beneficial to all involved—the father, the child, and of course, the mother.

However, these columns, after this first one that introduces the concept of this new, personally-invested and involved father, often divided into one of a couple of themes—either in some way endorsing this version by encouraging fathers to take an active role in everything in their child’s lives from nutrition to education to summer day camps or by expressing concern about the father’s role in the family, and particularly, by indicating a great deal of anxiety about whether the father has a positive place in the family, essentially by determining whether the father is a loved, and loving, involved member of the family unit or whether he is a “tyrant” whose only concern is disciplining the children. Terms like “tyrant” and “despot” are used multiple times in various columns to describe a type of father who is authoritarian, overly concerned with discipline, and essentially unloving. One column focuses on the father’s role in disciplining the child and asserts that fathers should not “rule our children despotically” (Sept 32). Another discourages “don’ting” a child, telling a child what they ought not to do frequently, which the writer argues makes for nervous and anxious children. All of the columns focused on this tyrant father indicate the negative effect that he has, not only on the children, but also on his own position in the family. These columns serve to emphasize the dangers to men if they don’t adhere to this cultural idea of the new father.

An example of this rhetoric of the “tyrant” father occurs in the second column in the series, written by Mary Elisabeth Overholt and one of the few columns not written by a father or a man. She disavows this “tyrant” father and talks about the destructive

influence that such a father has on his place in the family. The writer's concern with disavowing the authoritarian father of old indicates her participation in the changing cultural constructions of fatherhood. She writes of this type of father,

Father is the wet blanket on all good times, the family grouch, the tight wad who spends money for the things the family doesn't want instead of what is wanted, the authority that forbids all pleasant activity and promotes that which is disagreeable. Sometimes he is feared and clever boys and girls work out elaborate systems of outwitting him and are proud of what they "put over." Sometimes he is a tyrant whose good will must be bought by some means or other if a concession is wanted. Sometimes he just doesn't count at all, doesn't pay any attention to the children, doesn't know of their activities, nor care what they do. And very, very rarely he is the loved and respected confidant of his sons and daughters. (July 1933)

In this conception of the father, the tyrant father is ineffectual, perhaps feared but not respected or loved. The writer, though, is calling out this type of father, what can be argued is the "traditional" version of the patriarchal father figure, for his lack of involvement in the lives of his children. This is a father who "doesn't pay attention," "doesn't know of their activities," and doesn't "care what they do." As a result, he is a father who "just doesn't count at all." Clearly, the cautionary tale being told here is that the tyrant father is an outdated, outmoded father who, like the telegraph or the oil lamp, has become an irrelevant dinosaur in the modern family. What the writer calls for, then, as a solution to this problem is mutual respect: "When your child was little it was natural enough for him to accept your authority simply because he was inexperienced and helpless and you were there to protect him. But as a boy grows toward manhood he needs less and less of your protection and more and more of your understanding. The basis for your easily won authority is gone; and you have to deserve his confidence and respect" (Aug 1932). This writer's concern with disavowing the authoritarian father of old

indicates her endorsement of the new father. When she writes, “the basis for your easily won authority is gone; and you have to deserve his confidence and respect,” it is hard not to read that line in terms of the larger cultural shift from the patriarchy’s “easily won authority,” which, as a result of the shifting dynamics within society and the family, is gone. In her construction, the tyrant father must shift too to a model of fatherhood that would “deserve” the respect and confidence of his children through having a personal, involved, and respectful relationship with his children. In other words, by being a New Father.

Another common rhetorical thread in the series related to creating a version of fatherhood that is active and engaged in the lives of their children does so by focusing on the father as a highly engaged playmate to his child. One such column encourages fathers to spend time playing mechanic with their sons when they are young to help them develop an aptitude for mechanical engineering later in life. Another column, written from the perspective of a father who wanted a son and had a daughter instead, depicts the father/daughter relationship as one of highly devoted and engaged playmates. The columnist, Anson Lowitz, writes of traveling with his young daughter:

Contrary to general opinion, she was not burdensome nor did her presence hamper us an iota in our travels. Indeed the very newness of the things in the world about her was a constant joy and inspiration to us. Of course, we always have made a point of including in our day things that would be of special interest to her. I doubt if any boy could have been a better sport or grander chum than this joyful bunch of girlhood. At night, when she's all tucked in her bed with supper and bath but tail-end memories of a day that is passed, I love to read and tell her stories, real stories of glamorous people and far-away places” (Sept 1933).

This column reads like an advertisement for having children. He essentially talks her up, referring to her as not “burdensome” and indicating how her “presence” did “not hamper

us an iota.” In fact, she provides “constant joy and inspiration.” However, this positive, mutually enriching relationship emerges not by limiting contact or involvement with her, but by encouraging it. He writes of making a “point of including” things that are of “special interest to her” and of being involved in her daily care, referring tucking her into bed, of her daily routine of supper and bath, and of telling her stories of “glamorous people and far-away places.” As a reward for his daily care and involvement, and his eschewing of the role of the tyrant father, he has a “joyful bunch of girlhood” who couldn’t be “a better sport or grander chum.” Despite these columns focus on play as the primary role of the father, this father is clearly taking the advice of the first column’s writer. He is making his relationship with his child personal by engaging himself in the daily care of his daughter. And he is rewarded for his modern notions of fatherhood with a “chum,” a child who is a source of deep personal fulfillment.

Of course, any new construction of, or shift in the views on, fatherhood can be cause for anxiety in itself. Another column expressed anxiety about this new father, one who is invested and interested, to this writer’s mind perhaps too much so, in the daily care of his children. L. C. Moore, in a March 1933 column, writes of the young mother today that she is “faced with the task of bringing up her children in accordance with entirely new ideas, which more often than not clash with her instinct. Halfway between the two, she is criticized by both the old and the new schools of thought.” This writer clearly sees this new, involved father as “interfering” in the mother’s proper place in child-rearing, one where the nursery is her sole province and where the father knows better than to interfere. Clearly, this is a modern problem, as the writer argues that the “young mother of today” faces “more interference from her husband than mothers have

had at any other time in the history of the world.” Seeing the father in particular as at the mercy of newfangled, modern views of parenting, the column implies that the mother is a bit more immune to such dangerous and disruptive theories. As a result, this father has a fundamental inability to effectively parent and lacks a full understanding of the real situation. In other words, he is depicted as a dilettante, someone who dabbles in parenting. This is clearly indicated in an example given concerning dealing with disciplining the children:

He hears their mother speak sharply to them, and he disapproves because to shout at a child is the worst thing a parent can do, according to all the new theories. When his wife comes downstairs, more tired than ever, he remonstrates with her. She should be more patient with the children and have a little more self-control. If she tells him—as she does if she has any spirit left—that in addition to having the children all day and every day she also has the other cares of running the house as well, he feels convinced that she is exaggerating. He expounds his ideas.

The scornful tone here, particularly with regard to “all the new theories,” indicates a lamenting of the lost father role of old, the authoritarian but disengaged father that the other columns are working so hard to convince men not to be.

Despite the multiple anxieties evidenced in these columns about exactly what should be encouraged as the father’s role in childcare, one thing was consistently evident—that fathers should take their paternal roles seriously. An April 1933 column provides a good example of the seriousness with which fathers were encouraged culturally to take their roles. A father writes introspectively about his role and his fear of being a “dictator” that “probably every father resorts too often to the role of a dictator. Explanations require time and he feels, perhaps, that he hasn’t time enough to make them. Again he may be tired and unwilling to goad himself to the effort which explanations demand.” In his estimation, though, “the man who accepts the office of fatherhood

should let no other activity interfere with the faithful discharge of his duties.” This column, written from the perspective of a father, seems to address the concern about the time commitment and emotional investment of being this new, involved father. As the writer indicates, a father might be “tired” and “unwilling” to put in the extra effort to be involved, to have a personal relationship with his children. He may just want to “resort to the role of dictator,” to not have to “explain his decision whenever an explanation is requested.” Despite these, as writer seems to indicate, perfectly natural feelings, he encourages fathers to take their roles seriously, to discharge their duties faithfully. In other words, he encourages them to see their roles as fathers as a vocation, for which they take their oaths solemnly. For this writer, “the business of fatherhood profits from sober reflection.”

Even further, throughout the columns, the immense value of the father’s contribution to their children’s upbringing was stressed. In the August 1933 edition, a psychologist writes, “Those of us who, as psychiatrists, work with parents in attempting to straighten out behavior problems and personality difficulties of children, see a great many more mothers than fathers,” indicating that this greater participation on the part of the mothers is a problem. He goes on to explain, “When it is possible, however, the father comes to the clinic to discuss the problem of the child. A factor which is immediately noticeable in these interviews is the concern which fathers show in regard to their boy’s relation to his playmates, their critical attitude as regards their son’s shortcomings and the fear that the boy is going to be a ‘sissy.’” The concern here stems from the perception of too much “mothering” and not enough “fathering” of the boy. The writer makes this clear when he goes on to argue in a particularly telling passage,

It is probably this fear on the part of fathers that makes them stern with their sons, believing that in this way they will “harden” them. This is especially likely to be true when most of the discipline, the care and training of the child, has been left to the mother. There are many instances in which fathers, from the very moment of the baby's arrival, have been completely divorced from any share in the care of the child. It is not surprising, then, that these fathers, in self-defense and to cover up their hurt pride, should become rather indifferent toward the child's progress. (Aug 1933)

In this construction, the “damage” done to the child results from the father’s “hands off” approach to childcare, from the fact that he has been “completely divorced from any share in the care of the child.” What is perhaps even more telling, though, is that the father takes this hands-off approach to his children in “self-defense” and “to cover up [his] hurt pride” regarding his child’s progress and development. In other words, the writer stresses the negative emotional impact that the father’s lack of involvement in the care of the child has, not only on the child, but also on the father. Clearly, being “divorced” from the daily care of the child damages both of them. The writer then advocates “patience, understanding treatment” rather than “anger or ridicule” in helping the son overcome the habits of being a “sissy.” The fascinating contradiction of encouraging the father to exhibit more positive emotions (patience, kindness, understanding) traditionally associated with the maternal rather than more negative emotions (anger, harshness) traditionally associated with the patriarchal while at the same time arguing that this feminized behavior results from too much maternal influence seems to go completely unnoticed by the writer. What is clear, though, is that once again, being involved in the daily care of their children is offered as a balm to cure the emotional ails of both the child and the father.

Continuing with this rhetorical theme of the dangers of excessive mothering, another writer, John Scotford, writes disparagingly and dismissively about the mother's excessive focus on her children and the father's ability to take a larger view. He argues that the mother's myopic focus is a danger to them that can only be mitigated by a father's involvement:

And then there are the worries which are the lot of a mother: first, the health of the children, the problem of their progress or lack of progress in school, and at all times the puzzle of stretching the family income to cover the family needs... How to settle the war debts is as nothing compared with the problem of curbing Johnnie's cough, while a panic in Wall Street is a mere trifle beside the calamity which occurred when Jane spilled ice cream down her new party dress.

In his construction, the mother's myopic focus on the "health of the children" or their "progress or lack of progress in school" means that she places undue significance on the events and issues in her children's lives. As he argues, "details have magnified themselves until they have assumed calamitous proportions." The sarcastic tone here indicates clearly the writer's view of this "problem" with modern mothers, which he sees as making her "tired and nervous." What is significant about his view, though, is the role that he sees as fathers as playing in this family dynamic. He goes on to claim, "Often men fail to realize the difference, which the presence of a father makes in the life of a home. Probably they never spent a day in the exclusive company of a baby or a group of small children. One of the finest services of the father is to distract the attention of the mother from those very children," indicating that although fathers probably never actually experience a day in the lives of their children, their presence in family life is valuable because of their ability to distract their wives' attention from their children. In other words, the father rescues the children from the overwhelming attention of the mother.

However, the writer once again brings the column back to the restorative and positive affect of children in the lives of men. He goes on at great length about the troubles that modern men face in American public life and the way that children in particular act as a balm for these modern wounds:

In American life today the man is usually subject to the strain of a direct and concentrated effort to achieve success...Most men are doomed to function as cogs in some sort of vast machine, a situation which is not at all flattering to their egos. If they do achieve some degree of personal responsibility, it is at the cost of shouldering terrific burdens. So the mind of the husband is not exactly calm as he returns home at the end of the day. He is tired out, not by a multiplicity of tasks so much as by doing 100 of one thing. His ego has been maybe troubled concerning the education and future status of his children. He may question whether life is worth living. But when he reaches home he knows it is. For there are his children. It is his children which keep many a man plugging along at an uninspiring job. He comes home, looks into the eyes of his son or daughter, and says to himself, "Why should I be downhearted when I have such a child as this growing up?" The virtue of having several children is that usually there will be at least one out of the bunch who will be bringing encouragement to the paternal heart. After all, there is no antidote for the blues quite so effective as children. (Oct 1933)

Again, this reads almost like an advertisement for having children, and in particular, having a good number of children as "usually there will be at least one out of the bunch who will be bringing encouragement to the paternal heart." But we again get the hyperbolic enumerating of the blessings bestowed by virtue of children's very presence in the lives of fathers, the fact they that function as an "antidote for the blues," one who brings "encouragement to the paternal heart," who just by virtue of "growing up" under his or her father's care, saves the father from feeling "downhearted," and gives his life as "cog" of society meaning and purpose. For the modern man, down trodden and depressed by his place in the world, children are being offered as a solution, a way to give oneself purpose and joy. While in some ways seeing the possession of a family and progeny as a

source of pride and purpose is not new, the particular rhetorical construction offered throughout the series—a construction of fatherhood that asserted that is not just by virtue of being a father, not by being the “tyrant” of the house, but by being a loving, invested, and most importantly, involved father that men gain a sense place and purpose in modern society—indicates a new societal view of fatherhood that located personal fulfillment in a man’s role as father.

It is this association of personal fulfillment and happiness with a man’s role as an active, involved, and invested father that allows the new father to function as a form of reproductive control. If reproductive control means not only limiting or preventing birth through technological means but also channeling and encouraging reproduction through cultural and societal rhetoric and constructions of gender, then the rhetoric surrounding the emergence of new fatherhood which serves to encourage women to reproduce indicates that new fatherhood aimed to control women’s reproductive choices. As women moved into the twentieth century and embraced new ideals of womanhood, the mother’s role, and their place in society, motherhood, with all of its traditional burdens placed on the shoulders of women, increasingly seemed like a choice rather than an inevitable certainty. More and more women could choose to opt out of, or at least reduce, these burdens by avoiding, putting off, or limiting their reproduction. And while the rhetoric of duty and obligation perhaps failed to sway women, a new father figure—one who longed for children, who was emotionally and personally invested in his role as father, and one who was willing to jointly take up the burdens of childcare alongside women—offered women a new model of parenthood that mitigated the concerns they had about their roles in the family and in society. Women could choose to reproduce, knowing that they would

be able to share the duties and responsibility of parenting with a willing and able partner. Ultimately, by making reproduction a personal choice, based on the needs of one's family and the desires of one's partner, rather than a public good or civic obligation, society changed not only the rhetoric of reproduction but also of fatherhood and in doing so, created the modern notion of shared parental responsibilities so familiar to us today.

Chapter 6: Reproduction Gets Personal

Much critical examination of pregnancy and reproduction has lately revolved around exploring societal and cultural understandings of miscarriage and infant loss. It is an inherently ideologically fraught issue for feminist. On the one hand, anti-women health and public policy initiatives often seize on these rhetorics of the trying-to-conceive community and the babylost community, a community of women who have experienced miscarriage, stillbirth, neonatal death and other forms of pregnancy and infant loss, to argue for the personhood of fetuses and the resulting need to “protect” the fetus by banning or severely limiting access to abortion and contraceptives. The recent, and largely unsuccessful, attempt on the part of the state of Texas to ban the use of abortifacient drugs, such as RU486 or Cytotec, in the thinly veiled guise of protecting women’s health, is an example of this political tactic. On the other hand, denying the grief that the women in the infertility or pregnancy and infant loss community face can also play into traditional anti-woman rhetorics of denying the very real lived experiences of large numbers of women, particularly when those experiences are ideologically messy and expose the fractures and cracks within our own conceptions of gender, reproduction, and motherhood.

Leslie Reagan, in writing of her own experience with miscarriage, describes a folder she received from the hospital on pregnancy loss. She writes, “That folder, and the institutionalization of language that it represented, informed me that I was in the midst of a social process that was remaking the meaning of miscarriage.”⁹⁵ For Reagan, this making of miscarriage into a “significant event infused with tragic meaning” is part of a

⁹⁵ Leslie Reagan, “From Hazard to Blessing to Tragedy: Representations of Miscarriage in Twentieth-Century America,” *Feminist Studies* 29.2 (2003), 356-378.

highly problematic cultural movement to delegitimize pregnancy termination by imbuing pregnancy with a special cultural and societal meaning. In other words, feminist scholars worry that if we grant women the right to see their miscarriage or pregnancy loss as a tragedy, are we not admitting that all pregnancy losses are tragedies? Her neat historical trajectory of miscarriage and pregnancy loss as moving from “silence” to “hazard” to “blessing” to “tragedy” falls into the trap, however, of denying the lived emotional experiences of women throughout history and the messiness of reproduction generally. Indeed, grief and loss are complex personal experiences, deeply rooted in cultural and social meanings, but also deeply intimate. Historian and cultural critic Carrie Pitzulo argues via the pseudo-scholarly blog *Nursing Clio*, a project that connects current debates over gender and medicine to historical scholarship, that “women have myriad experiences and feelings, but we are taught to deny the unpleasant, to hide what doesn’t conform to unfair, unrealistic, simplistic expectations.”⁹⁶ She goes on to assert that “we need to stop assuming that women can ever conform to a one-size-fits all label, because our experiences are historically, culturally, and personally contingent.” For Regan, and for Pitzulo, their miscarriages were not imbued with tragedy. As we move into the twentieth-first century as scholars, critics, and feminists, we must somehow come to terms with this divide. Pitzulo’s answer of seeing reproductive experiences and practices as “historically, culturally, and personally contingent” seems like a good place to start.

When I began writing this dissertation on the culture surrounding reproduction and reproductive control, I had myself only experienced the “prevention” side of the reproductive control equation. I had for years used various modern forms of contraceptives—primarily hormonal birth control (“the pill”)—to prevent conception,

⁹⁶ “My Miscarriage (Is Not Your Miscarriage)”, *Nursing Clio*

with little thought given to the sociocultural dynamics at play in my choice to delay the start of my reproductive years, or the way that my doing so participated in appropriate demographic trends for my time period, my nation, my age, and my education level.

However, over the course of the several years that I worked on completing the project, I stopped taking my hormonal birth control. In the parlance of the virtual community of women actively seeking to become pregnant, I was “TTC,” trying to conceive. The rhetoric of the community aptly indicates the nature of it, the way that reproduction is culturally and popularly imagined as something one “tries” for, something one aims to achieve, and the way that conception itself is heralded as the end point—not the start—of the process. As a society, we have come so far from the biological, reproductive certainty of our foremothers and grandmothers that we have essentially come full circle. Controlling reproduction, that is the ability to reliably prevent it, an ability that had once largely eluded women, now has become so easy, so attainable, that our attention in reproductive matters has turned to getting pregnant. There are no online support groups for women trying, and failing, to prevent pregnancy. There are, though, many support groups for women trying, and failing, to conceive.

However, though the TTC community and the larger culture of pregnancy, a culture dominated by books like *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, largely imagine conception as the end of the reproductive journey, the reality of modern day pregnancy does not differ that much from women in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. While prenatal care has improved significantly in the past century, which drastically improves the chances of a successful and healthy life birth, pregnancy, fetal development, and neonatal care largely remain mysteries for modern medicine. Large numbers of women

continue, as our foremothers and grandmothers did, to have unsuccessful pregnancies.

Fetuses fail to develop correctly, or are spontaneously miscarried, or endanger the life of the mother, for reasons that modern medicine generally cannot determine, nor prevent or treat. For these women, conception is not the end of the reproductive journey.

My own experiences “trying” to conceive demonstrate the difficulty of achieving the holy grail of the TTC community—the “H&H,” a happy and healthy baby. My first pregnancy, which took a year of “trying” to achieve, ended in the late-term termination of my son Harrison at twenty-three weeks. He suffered from the fatal chromosomal abnormality Trisomy 18. I was counseled by my perinatologist, after weeks of debate and turmoil and a subsequent amniocentesis to confirm the diagnosis, to take Cytotec, a miscarriage-inducing drug, to induce early labor and then admitted to the hospital to give vaginal birth to my son, who was stillborn. And my experience, as I have learned, was not that exceptional. While the numbers may be in modern medicine’s favor, the realities of reproduction’s fragility are still harsh for many women and families.

Undaunted in my pursuit to reproduce, my reproductive story continued, and the following year, I was once again pregnant, this time with twins. I lost one of the twins very early in the pregnancy, a very common occurrence with twin pregnancies, but one that increased the risk to the survival of the remaining twin and that complicated, and ultimately made impossible, the ability to do an available in utero testing, the CVS or chorionic villus sampling where the doctor takes cells from the placenta to test for genetic abnormalities, which would have allowed the doctor to determine early in the pregnancy whether this baby had Trisomy 18 as well. Ultimately, I did get my “H&H”, or in the parlance of the “babylost” community, my “rainbow baby.” My very healthy and happy

daughter is now almost three years old, and each year of her life takes me farther away from the loss of my son, although the pain of that loss is one that I still feel acutely. As a culture, we are in many ways obsessed with a particular version of pregnancy, one that insulates us against the historical reality of the messiness of reproduction and pregnancy, and imagine a sort of what-to-expect pregnancy where by virtue of reading the right books, eating the right foods—and avoiding the wrong ones—and having a women-centered birth plan, we can ensure a happy outcome. As Elizabeth McCracken writes in her poignant memoir of her own experiences with stillbirth, *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination*, as a society, we think of the fetus in the womb as a “sure thing” (2). It is not surprising then that the idea of “babylost” is so hard for society to face. Another popular term in the “babylost” community is “medusa,” a self-appointed label for babylost mothers to describe a woman who has experienced a form of grief that is unrecognizable, and unrecognized, by society.⁹⁷

There are more forces at work in our individual choice to reproduce, or not, than we realize. And the pursuit of controlling birth is fraught with even more political debate everyday. Forced sterilization of inmates in a California prison, concern over the “baby penalty” women pay over the course of a career and the decision to “opt out” of their professions, political controversy over the scientific development of “post-fertilization” contraceptives, new restrictive abortion laws requiring women to undergo a transvaginal ultrasound before being allowed to receive an abortion in several states, headline-

⁹⁷ One particular website within this virtual community of “babylost” is called *Glow in the Woods*, which asserts that it is an online refuge “for parents of lost babies and potential of all kinds” (“What Is This Place?”). They further claim that it is a place a place “where us medusas can take off our hats, none minding the sight of all the snakes. Because not only can we bear the sight of each other—we crave it” (“What Is This Place?”).

grabbing stories of surrogacy gone wrong—stories of the fault lines of reproduction inundate our society. These stories reveal the cracks and fissures of current debates over reproduction and reproductive control. As modern medicine advances and increases our knowledge and understanding of the in utero development of the fetus, as medical advances provide more choices for diagnosing, or even treating, the fetus even while in the womb, as new forms of fertility treatment allow doctors, and women, greater levels of control over conception, as new forms of contraceptives—post-conception options, for examples, or the male “pill”—offer new relationships to preventing birth, we face a host of new complicated issues surrounding women’s reproductive processes and practices. In many ways, the central question of reproductive control—who’s controlling reproduction and for what purpose—has also come full circle. The primary focus of reproductive control has been moved from wrestling the prevention of birth from the hands of nature to wrestling conception, pregnancy, and childbirth and their related reproductive processes from capricious and mercurial Mother Nature. As science and medicine increasingly allow us to accomplish this goal, the central question, though, remains—if Mother Nature is no longer in control of these reproductive processes of women, who is?

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